

I want to break these bones till they're better
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Character:

[John "Soap" MacTavish](#), [Simon "Ghost" Riley](#), [Kyle "Gaz" Garrick](#), [John Price \(Call of Duty\)](#), [Kate Laswell](#), [Kate Laswell's Wife](#), [Alejandro Vargas](#), [Rodolfo Parra](#), [John "Soap" MacTavish's Family](#)

Additional Tags:

[Implied/Referenced Sexual Assault](#), [Implied/Referenced Child Abuse](#), [Implied Sexual Content](#), [Asexual Simon "Ghost" Riley](#), [Demisexual Simon "Ghost" Riley](#), [Domestic Fluff](#), [Angst](#), [Anxiety Attacks](#), [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD](#), [Comic: Modern Warfare 2: Ghost](#), [Game: Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II \(2022\)](#), The implied tags are because I reference Ghost's comic, I read the ghost comic so you don't have to, [Nightmares](#), [Cuddling & Snuggling](#), [First Time](#), im leaving stuff up to yalls imagination, [Not Beta Read](#), no beta we die like ghost circa 2009, [Other Additional Tags to Be Added](#), [POV John "Soap" MacTavish](#), [Plot](#), [Men Crying](#), [POV Multiple](#), [POV Simon "Ghost" Riley](#), [Dysfunctional Family](#), [I'm Bad At Tagging](#), [Light Smut](#), it's not super detailed but it is there

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by [saturnite0614](#)

Summary

Humans? We don't want to be fixed. We like being broken. We like cracks. They let in the light that is other people. But sometimes those cracks get too big, so we fill them in with concrete so they stop growing. We're like pavement in that way. It doesn't stay crisp and solid. It crumbles and when it does, life comes back in. Against all odds, a plant grows through the cracks. All we ask is that others don't trample it.

Ghost is on his own journey. And he's doing it for you. Because once that plant makes it past the pavement, it needs the sun. He doesn't need you to tear down his walls. He just needs you to be there when he does it himself. That's what we all need.

A few weeks have passed since the disaster that was 141's last operation and Soap and Ghost both have to grapple with the feelings that linger from it. They have time right? Afterall, what are people to do when they have six months to themselves?

domestic bliss and all that shit

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song Charge by Splendid

This is a sequel to my previous work *A Place Called Home* . You can read this one without reading the first one, but reading it will definitely make this one read better.

Trying my hand at shorter chapters in the hopes of getting the story to you guys faster. I won't have a regular update schedule as this is still very much a work in progress, but know that you do have a lot coming for you. Hope you guys enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

24 October 2023 | Home | 07:30:46 | John MacTavish

He'd been awake five hours now, just watching the time tick by on his alarm clock. He'd unplugged it before he left for active duty months ago and plugged in just last night in the hopes of getting his sleep schedule under control again.

It hadn't worked.

Soap groans as he rolls out of bed. Weeks removed from what he was referring to as *the incident* – or *the fuckery*, depending on his mood – and he'd run out of the higher quality pain meds and just had to make do with the acetaminophen that may have expired while he was gone. That's probably why it wasn't having the desired effect. He wonders how Ghost's getting along and resists the urge to pick up his phone and message him about it. He lets the thought go.

Not like he'd respond anyway. He'd been radio silent since their leave started almost two weeks ago. The only indication he was okay was that Price had told Soap he was. Still, he had watched the sent and unread messages pile up. He didn't have the heart or energy to send another one. He didn't really have the energy for anything.

He stumbles through his flat in the dark, almost tripping over the guitar by his bedroom door. He bang his leg against it and an untuned note rings through his apartment. High E, he thinks? The note also

rings sharply through his head.

"Ow."

A few seconds later, the guitar clatters to the floor. "Me too," He rights it, placing it back up against the wall,, "Me too."

The sound sensitivity is new, probably a response to sleep deprivation. Every sound with even a slightly high pitch threatens to give him a migraine – like a hangover without the fun part of the night.

It wasn't fair to act like Ghost was the only one ignoring him. He was just the one that hurt the most. You couldn't torture this information out of him, but he thought that maybe the two of them would spend more time together. They'd cuddled, for Christ's sake and apparently that didn't warrant even a phone call to tell him to go fuck himself. Despite that, he couldn't bring himself to be actually angry at him, just worried. He'd learned in those days just how easily Ghost shut down, not only to other people but to himself. The only consolation is a double edged sword. Price was checking in on him; had promised he was okay physically, at least. He wasn't alone like Soap had feared. But that also meant that he's not returning Soap's messages on purpose.

Price stayed in touch the most through text and phone calls at least once a day, but it wasn't like Soap had seen him in person. Gaz messaged occasionally, but he'd been busy catching up with family and friends. Soap had video calls with his parents the first week back, but they had moved back to Scotland a few years after Soap enlisted. He tried calling his sister, but it always went to voice message. She'd send a text in the middle of the night to say she was okay. Shitty time difference. So it was just him and his cousin and his cousin was out on deployment. The 141 was all he had left.

He opens the curtains, letting in the city lights and rising sun into his flat. Opening them had been the extent of his plans for the day. The window reflects back his tired eyes and disheveled state. At least his flat looked better than he did. It couldn't really get messy when hadn't done anything besides lounge in bed with his guitar across his lap, which he couldn't even bring himself to strum, all in an attempt to not call Ghost and leave another message.

But he couldn't spend the next five months waiting for Ghost. The idleness would drive him mad. And when you're used to being shot at and blown up and sleeping on hard surfaces, relaxation is both a

blessing and a curse. Even productiveness feels like procrastination. He hadn't touched his guitar because it wasn't work. He hadn't touched his laptop because it wasn't work. The only thing related to work he could do was exercise and that still hurt too much. Because everything wasn't work, he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he did nothing. And nothingness is a sickness. Laying in bed or on the couch all day, staring at the ceiling, his head would begin to ache. Sitting up brought on dizzy spells that would send him back to lying down. Whenever he became hungry, he'd wait until every part of him screamed for action and then he could only manage a few bites before he's hanging over the toilet, waiting for vomit that never comes. It'd been like this for days.

So after slapping himself in the face with cold water and downing three consecutive cups of hot coffee, he went about making himself a person again.

His hair had grown a few inches since he'd been discharged from the hospital. The hair tickling the back of his neck made him want to break his fingers. He couldn't shave it for a long time because he'd been prohibited from extending his arms too far above his head. The doctors had been worried that it would disrupt the stitches on his back. Now he's finally able to pull his razor from the bathroom cabinet and get to work.

While the bags under his eyes remain, the face he knew as his slowly begins to come back, with every strip of hair he shaves away. It takes scissors and muscle memory to shorten the mohawk itself, but eventually he gets it back into shape.

The sun rises and begins to set, acting as a backdrop to Soap's day. He showers, makes an actual breakfast, turns on a TV show in Spanish to listen to while he cleans up. He repeats every sentence out loud and cringes at his hard pronunciations, nowhere near the fluency of Alejandro and Rodolfo's. He could see their tight, but encouraging, smiles every time he butchered a word.

By 6pm, he'd binged two seasons of a show and had learned nothing about the plot and probably very little Spanish. The sun is hanging lazily about the horizon, not yet wanting to sink into full night. He'd worked out as much as his traumatized body would let him – stretching, push-ups, even laps going up and down the stairs of his building. Everything is stiff. His own fault as he should have been doing light exercises the moment he was cleared to leave.

Soap's about to pick up his guitar when his phone dings with a message.

Gaz: Price and I are getting drinks. Wanna come?

Soap: Just tell me where.

It occurs to Soap that this would be the first time leaving his house since getting back. Well, the first time socially. His phone dings again with the name of a small dive bar that they'd met at before. It rarely saw a lot of people. Perfect.

Soap takes the tube and meets Gaz at a station near the bar. The place is packed, but it doesn't take long for him to find Gaz standing near an entrance, his back against the wall. He's scrolling on his phone, but his eyes flick up every few seconds, scouting the area around them. That ever vigilant behavior is why he rarely left his house. Grocery trips are hard enough when you suck at meal planning, even harder when you're not sure if the guy at the other end of the aisle has been following you. Soap shoves his hands in his sweatshirt pocket, protecting them from the crisp fall air.

"Oi!" He waves to Gaz, "Where's Price?"

Gaz pulls him into a one-armed hug, "He said to meet him there. Had an errand to run first. Also said not to worry because he'd probably be there before us. Doesn't matter to me because I'm not leaving until I get my free drink."

"From the hospital bet?"

Gaz slaps his back, "If only you'd won. I'm thinking of getting the most expensive thing on the menu."

The two spend the walk catching each other up on family life. Gaz's brother apparently graduates from secondary school this upcoming June. Soap didn't even know he had a brother until that moment. Soap fills him in on his parents move, musing about maybe taking a month of their leave to be with them. An image flits across his mind of Ghost being with him. Mundane things like having dinner or taking a hike around the highlands always came to him, as easily as breathing. He was obsessing.

And he would be drinking *so much* tonight.

Gaz's phone dings, pausing both of them in their tracks.

“The codger did it. Must not have been that big of an errand.” He tilts the phone towards Soap.

Price: Grabbed up a table towards the back. Place is packed.

“That doesn’t sound right,” Soap says, “That place is a hole in the wall. I don’t think it’s ever served more than ten people, maximum.”

“You serious? You do realize Halloween is in a week? Bars get busy. American tourists go on their ghost tours and get spooked by every whistling alleyway. What doesn’t sound right is that he hasn’t started a fight over whether it’s called football or soccer.”

“It’s still early.”

Price hadn’t been exaggerating when he said the place was packed. Patrons lean against the exterior walls with their drinks in hand. Some smile at Gaz as if he were an old friend but the look he gives Soap says *I have no idea who that is*. They squeeze through the crowd of people sloshing drinks around, screaming at the television, and singing to music that’s barely audible. The man at the bar raises a hand towards them and points towards the back. Soap didn’t know his name, but Gaz breaks from their partnership to speak with him. Immediately, the crowd closes in around him. No one is quite drunk yet as it’s only around 7pm, but they’re all making a good effort. A woman bumps into him while walking towards the stereo with her friend.

“Sorry about that, luv.”

“No problem.”

She bites her lip, turning back to her friend with a giggle. “They don’t make them better than Scotland.” Her friend says, nudging her and they disappear into the crowd. Soap can’t help embracing the compliment, puffing out his chest a bit and putting on his crooked smile.

Gaz hasn’t come back, still talking with the bartender. He’ll look over his shoulder at something in the back corner or at Soap before getting sucked back into conversation with others at the bar. Soap catches the woman and her friend staring occasionally as well. The pride begins to eb away, replaced by an itch to not be so exposed. With how crowded the place is, anyone could hurt him. All it would take is a well timed bump. He shoves his way to the back, always pushing those around him an arms-length away. As the level of drunkenness hadn’t reached

late-night levels, anyone angered by this were cooled off by a sorry and a smile.

The crowd thins towards the back where most of the tables had been shoved. People fill every seat, but it's not like there are people mingling between the cramped tables. Butted up against the walls are three booths – a corner booth and two others. The last acts as a pseudo-hallway to the bathrooms. Sitting in the corner booth are two men. One wears a black beanie and a t-shirt. His jacket lays bunched up on the booth seat. Next to him, stuck in the weird corner of the corner booth, is a much larger man, dressed head to toe in black. He wears a balaclava with a faded skull on it, surprisingly lacking his usual black makeup around the eyes. His jacket sleeves are pulled up revealing a black sweater underneath. He has the edge of his sweater sleeve gripped in his hand, the other home to a full drink. Price never takes his gaze away from the television over the bar, but it's clear he's engaged in conversation with Ghost.

Ghost's eyes slide to Soap, standing just a few feet away from them. He nudges Price who follows his gaze and who then opts to wave him over, instead of the fruitless endeavor of yelling over the noise.

Soap sits down, sliding into the corner to make room for the still missing Gaz. "Gaz is here. He's just–"

"At the bar." Ghost grunts, pulling his drink closer to him.

"Ghost clocked you both as soon as you came in." Price sips from his drink.

Ghost keeps his eyes on his drink. The ice inside has melted, bringing what was probably two ounces of bourbon, to the lip of the cup.

"How's the game?" Soap asks, looking at the television over his shoulder. They'd gone to break. An ad for an energy drink plays across the screen.

"Shit." Price says, a hint of disappointment in his voice, "Nothing interesting really going on. But I didn't come here for that."

"Oh?" Soap leans forward, hearing as the stickiness of the table latches onto his jacket. He loves Price, loves that man to death, but there was no way he'd be able to focus on anything he said.

Ghost is right there. And he just sits, looking around like he didn't make Soap's heart race just by breathing. Or that Soap had tasted

those lips and held him, and this is the first time they've seen each other in weeks. He bites the inside of his cheek, forcing himself to focus on Price.

"I wanted to touch base. See how you all were doing, in the flesh."

Four drinks clank against the table, the ice clinking around inside. Gaz scoots in next to Soap, pushing him closer to Ghost. The two are millimeters away from touching shoulder to shoulder. Breathe Soap.

"Doing fine." He says, more to convince himself than Price.

"More like keep from going mad." Gaz supplies, "There's only so many livestreams of old football games you can watch before you chuck your laptop out the window. Sound about right?" He pushes the drinks out towards the rest of them.

Price downs the rest of his current one before accepting the new one, "Been having similar thoughts?"

"I'm not used to having time to do things," Gaz sighs, "I've done nothing but jogging and catching up on laundry. What about you two?" He nods towards Soap and Ghost.

"Pretty much the same," Soap says, sipping from the bourbon that Gaz had so wonderfully supplied, "It's amazing how quickly discipline leaves you when there's not a ticking time bomb you have to worry about." And when all you really want to do is spend that time with the guy you like, but you are never sure where you stand with him.

"The amount of times I've told my alarm to *fuck off* is embarrassing." Gaz admits.

Price snorts, "It's nice to see you three can function well in civvy life."

The crowd screams as the game comes back on. Text flits across the screen, filling in new viewers on what they missed. Price takes it upon himself to fill Gaz in, and the adjacent table. Three patrons lean over, hanging onto his every word as if it were football gospel. Soap tunes it out. If Price said a game was shit, it meant that neither team was doing anything interesting. Sure, one might have been winning, but it was probably through the most basic means possible.

Instead, Soap leans over to Ghost, ignoring the dangerous speed at which his heart beats. He dares to press his shoulder against his. Was he imagining Ghost doing the same? Could be he's leaning over in

order to better hear Soap.

“Can we talk?” He asks as loudly as he dares. For a moment, he thinks Ghost doesn’t hear him as his gaze remains focused on Price as he talks.

“Always.”

“I mean in private.” Soap looks around, suddenly rethinking this entire course of action. There isn’t really a place that you could consider private in a place like this. Not the kind of private Soap needed.

Ghost looks over, “You cut your hair.” He says, “It was longer when we got back.”

“Yeah, it was bothering me. You didn’t really answer me.”

He sighs, “Follow me.”

Soap’s heart stops there.

Ghost nudges Price, interrupting his monologue on some of the best football plays he’s seen. Ghost’s words get lost in the din of the bar but Price lets them both out, opting to lean on the table to continue his story. One of the bar patrons argues that a different play was better and Price looks like he’s about to kiss the guy right there.

Ghost leads Soap into the closet that counts as the men’s bathroom. There are two stalls and a single urinal. The mirror is cracked at the corners and splattered with soap and water spots. Soap begins to *really* rethink this entire mission. What kind of place is this to have any serious conversation? This is where you take whoever you met that night to make out because neither of you feel safe enough to follow each other home. The skin on the back of his neck goes red.

Ghost keeps his back to the mirror as he checks the stalls for people. Soap stands uselessly against the door, trying to collect his thoughts because if he were honest, the first thing he wanted to do was grab Ghost by the face and pull him into the longest kiss of both their lives. That, as nice as it sounds, isn’t talking.

Soap opens his mouth to speak, but it’s Ghost’s voice that fills the bathroom.

“I’m sorry. For ignoring you.”

Everything flies out his head. "That's...uh, big of you." Relief wants to flood through Soap's system, but wariness blocks it. "You gonna tell me why?"

Ghost rubs his face. His jaw works to say more. Soap wants to reach out and hold him, give him all the time in the world to speak, but he worries whatever Ghost plans to say will be locked away forever. It might hurt more than help.

He huffs, "I...wanted to call you and that...I don't know. I wanted to call you but I realized that I treated you like shit during that entire mission. And you were patient with me. More than I deserved."

He can't help it anymore. Soap reaches out and grasps his hand. Ghost's arm locks up again, like it had when he'd taken it in the hospital.

"That's all you've got?" Soap chuckles.

"For now." He says, "Look, Johnny," Ghost shifts his weight from side to side, unsure of where his balance is, "I don't need you to be my therapist. I don't *want* you to be my therapist. I knew if I called you, it'd be worse than ignoring you. I needed to get my head straight."

"What are you talking about?" He crosses his arms.

"You want me to lean on you and to trust you, but I know if I lean on you too much, it's going to drive you away," Ghost takes a step forward, "So I'm leaning back. But I'm not stepping away."

"Ignoring me for weeks seems like stepping away."

"I know."

Soap looks down at his boots, scuffing the scarred tile with the toes, "So what exactly are you saying?"

"I want this to work. But for it to work, there are things I need to tell you. Things that I'm not ready for." The words stumble out of him, as if he's not used to saying them. His lips struggle to form them into sentences that mean anything through his gruff voice.

"I'm not sure whether any of that's a good apology or not, Lt. I don't mean to make you feel like shit or anything, but I spent days worrying about whether you were going to pull through then I spent days laying in your bed with you because you couldn't bear to see me leave the

room. Suddenly we're back home and you can't even text me a *go fuck yourself?*"

Soap wants to muster up some anger. He had plenty of sources from the fights they'd had before the kiss, to the hours spent waiting for a returned text, to the embarrassment of having to ask Price to check in on him. But all he has is that same tiredness that kept him in bed. He could see in Ghost's eyes that he *is* making him feel like shit. He sees it in the way they drop to the floor instead of roaming around Soap's face.

Ghost jams his hands in his pockets, "I'm not one to make promises-"

"Then don't."

"But you make me want to make promises. So while I can't give you specifics or maybe exactly what you want, I can promise you that I will do better."

He adds quietly, "I want to see that stupid crooked smile of yours. I just want to be deserving of it."

Soap inhales deeply, breathing in the chemically minty scent of urinal cake, the smell of last night's beer, and the ever present smell of dehydrated piss. He couldn't believe what he was about to say in a place like this.

"That's not fair." He says.

"I know-"

Soap holds his hand up, "You need to let me finish. It's not fair, because no matter what you say, I still want to kiss you. And you're saying all this shite in a pub bathroom about how you *want* to be with me."

"You were the one who wanted to talk at this moment."

"You're saying you would have called me later to talk?"

Ghost is silent.

"That's what I thought." Soap drops his arms, "I'm still mad. You had me worried sick. But, I accept your half-apology. On one condition."

"Name it, Johnny."

"Pick up the phone." He says, then, "I'm probably going to head back, get a drink."

As he turns, "Soap?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." Ghost steps forward and lifts his arm, like he's about to go into a shoulder hug but thought better of it. His hand slaps to his side. "Thank you," he repeats.

"Of course."

"Johnny?"

"What?" Soap's voice comes out gruffer than he intends, just wanting to get out of this conversation and drink and reset. He needed to process what Ghost had said. He understood it, to an extent. He wanted to be with Soap. Did that mean he...liked...him too or that he liked having someone to talk to? Did that mean kissing was still included or did he just want his friend back? What did anything mean?

Ghost's voice is harsh, not at all matching the words he speaks next. "Can I kiss you?"

Soap's heart flip flops. It's all he's wanted for the last few weeks. Part of him wants to walk away and let Ghost feel what he's felt. But the thought of that breaks his heart. Dammit.

"Thought you'd never ask." He gives in so easily. Soap places a hand on his cheek, putting a thumb under the edge of his mask.

Simon closes his eyes as Soap pulls the mask up just enough to kiss his lips. It's like medicine after weeks of suffering. Simon grasps Soap's shoulder, sliding his hand to his neck where it seems to fit perfectly. He plays with the longer hairs of his mohawk. Cold and hot sensations burn through Soap's nerves and make his fingers tingle. He rubs Simon's cheekbone, feeling the dry warmth of his face.

The door bursts open as a drunk guy barges in. Soap and Ghost break apart, but it's already too late. The guy pauses, "Am I interrupting something?"

"No." Ghost pulls his mask down

"You having a good night?" Soap asks, face burning.

"...Yeah. I'm just going to..." He points to a stall.

"Go piss." Ghost says in his deep voice, almost barking it as an order. The guy startles and scurries into the stall.

Neither of them talk until they're standing outside the restrooms.

"That guy is never going to forget that," Soap says, slapping Ghost on the shoulder, "Come on before Price and Gaz mount a rescue mission."

"Rog that."

There's more people crowded around their table as they arrive. The girl that had bumped into Soap earlier leans on the table, talking with animated movements to Gaz. The conversation is impossible to hear until Soap and Ghost are literally sliding back into the booth, sandwiching poor Price in the corner.

"I agree that people don't give it enough credit!" She says excitedly, "Especially with how cut throat the championships are."

"What are they talking about?" Soap leans over to Price, practically yelling in his ear.

Price sips from a new glass, "Chess."

Gaz slaps the table, "Exactly!"

Anyone who didn't know better might see the interaction and think Gaz is feigning interest in order to kiss a pretty girl but that wasn't the type of guy he was. Even knowing this, Soap is baffled.

"Gaz likes Chess?"

"Apparently."

"Hey, Gaz!" He calls over to him. The girl looks over first, recognition flitting across her eyes. Now that he wasn't in such an open position, he can get a better look at her. She has thick, curly black hair tied back into a bun and she'd accentuated her dark skin with holographic highlighter. Her friend behind her blushes under Soap's gaze, but she doesn't until her gaze is back on Gaz. Good for her.

Soap continues, "You seemed pretty friendly with the owner over there."

Gaz sips from his glass, "Came here all the time when I was stationed here. Work was tedious, brass always micromanaging the shit out of us, but we'd end the day here."

The girl slaps the table, "I thought I recognized you. I come here all the time."

And with that Gaz and she slip back into conversation.

The night continues like that. Hour by hour, the four men sit in the same booth as other groups cycle through. Drinks are bought and had. By the end, Soap's head is fuzzy but he's nowhere near drunk. Every time he thinks about buying another drink with the intention of actually getting drunk, he thinks about how crowded the place is. If he got drunk, what things would he miss? No, he couldn't afford it. Getting drunk was a luxury you had to save for home. The others seemed to share the same sentiment. Price pretends he drank a lot, but his eyes are alert as ever. Gaz flirts and converses like someone without a care in the world, but it doesn't take an expert to see that he never turns his back towards the bar. None of them do. Their table has very few glasses for the six hours they'd been there.

Gaz stretches his back out as they prepare to leave, meanwhile, Simon pushes away another watered-down bourbon towards the center of the table – the ice melted all the way. Gaz exchanges numbers with the chess girl, Ntombi, while Price bids goodbye to his gaggle of football fans. It should have taken around five minutes to make it from their booth to the street outside. Instead, it took ten. Whatever buzz they'd had fizzed out by the time they made it out.

The already chilly fall air had taken on a hard edge during their time in the pub. It's comforting after the heat of the bar. Soap closes his eyes and lets the wind blow over his face until his nose goes red. He opens his eyes to Ghost watching him. For the first time, Soap doesn't turn away. Instead he smiles. He realizes that he doesn't want him to walk away. He'd been in a desert without him, and now he was drinking him in, afraid of being once again lost without water.

He decides to ask before letting the embarrassment stop him, "Do you-"

"I don't like being sappy," Gaz interrupts, "But I missed you guys." His voice takes on a soft tone.

Price pulls him into a half hug, "Sappy looks good on you son," And before Soap knows it, Price has an arm around his shoulders as well.

Ghost stands to the side, hands in pockets.

"Correction, I don't like *you* being sappy, Captain." Gaz says as he not-so-subtly leans into Price's side. Soap does too, overwhelmed by the feeling of just being with people he trusts. He reaches out to Ghost and two more sets of eyes land on him.

His muscles lock in place, eyes widening slightly. Soap's hand drops to his side.

Ghost turns away from them, "I'm going home. Safe trip."

Price sighs, releasing Gaz and Soap from his grip, "Safe trip."

"Wait!" Soap calls out. Ghost is a few feet away from them. With Soap's voice, he stops cold.

"My place is nearby," He makes sure to make eye contact with both Price and Gaz, "I've got leftovers that need to be eaten and it's not like we've got anywhere to be in the morning."

"I'm always down for free food." Gaz says.

"Ghost? You coming?" Ghost still hadn't turned back towards them. Soap prays he doesn't begin walking away because he knows his heart can't take it. It doesn't matter if Price and Gaz come because the invitation isn't for them. The invitation isn't even about food. It's about spending time with Simon. It's about not wanting this time to end. Price and Gaz are just a nice bonus. It's cruel in a way, springing it on him in front of others. As this thought comes across his mind and Soap's about to back the offer up, Ghost turns back around. He doesn't say anything, but he also doesn't leave.

"Lead the way, sergeant." Price pats his back and as Soap begins walking towards the tube station, he sees him do the same with Ghost. Soap's lips twitch upwards.

Price takes a seat on the tube while the others opt to stand. He groans sitting down, rubbing his left shin.

"Struggling there, old man?" Gaz taunts.

"It happens when you're old. You'll get there. Besides, I got shot in case you don't remember. That's why we're here instead of at work." He smiles and readjusts his beanie.

"Ghost and I were blown up." Soap points out, "We're doing just fine."

"You also slept for days. I could argue with you all night, MacTavish."

Ghost chuckles. While Gaz and Soap hold onto a pole, Ghost hangs off a bright orange strap. Unlike when he had arrived, the space is empty. Only three other people are taking the tube this late – probably all pub goers who decided to pack it in. Two get off at the next two stops before Soap and the others follow suit. While his flat hadn't been disgusting, or even disheveled, he's glad he tidied up. Didn't need them taking the piss out of him for the rest of their careers.

"You gonna call that girl?" Ghost asks, cocking his head to the side.

Gaz shakes his head and sighs, "You know, I want to, but..."

Soap listens calmly as he unlocks the door, feeling a pressure to move faster despite the fact that the conversation isn't even focused on him.

"But?"

"We're gonna be back at work in a few months, that's not fair to her."

"It's not fair if you don't call either." Price notes, pursing his lips.

"Rock," Ghost leans against the wall, "Meet hard place."

"How'd you like it if I called you, took you on a few dates, then said 'Bye babe, I've got to go die for my country and won't see you for a few years'." Gaz glares at Ghost.

He smirks, "Depends where you take me, Garrick." Ghost looks at Soap, melting him to the floor right there. Good thing there are others here because Soap would have said some...*unprofessional*, words right then and there.

"Quit flirtin' you two. You're making me sick." Price groans.

Soap busies himself with turning on lights and grabbing leftovers from the fridge. He'd made shrimp and rice two days ago when he'd been hit with a rare spark of energy but only ate a few bites before shoving it into the refrigerator and almost forgetting about it. If it were just him, he'd heat it in the microwave, but he feared what Ghost and Gaz might say. Price, on the otherhand was a notoriously bad cook. Soap had never tasted it, but he'd heard the stories. He shudders as he dumps the shrimp and a medley of vegetables – bok choy, carrots, and

bell peppers – into a pan.

“You guys can put your jackets and shoes in the bedroom.” He says.

As the pan heats and the food actually begins to warm, the others disappear into his bedroom.

Gaz whistles, “Your place is nice, MacTavish.”

“Nice places have booze,” Ghost, sans jacket, leans his elbows on the counter. Soap bites his lip and does not keep himself from staring at his ass. Ghost smirks.

“Bookshelf in the living room, bottom cabinet. Help yourself.”

“Need help with anything in here?”

“Heat up the rice,” He nods towards the container with white rice clumped together in a brick.

“Rog.”

“No wonder your place is nice,” Gaz laments, holding up a bottle of cheap-looking whiskey, “Because you skimp on everything else.”

“Don’t knock it till you try it,” Soap waves a spatula at him, “My nan drank that stuff all the time and swore by it and I always trust my nan. That cratur there will have you oot yer tree in no time.”

Gaz’s face scrunches and he looks at Price, helpless.

“Just drink it.” He says, wisely.

Ghost sets a pan on the stove with some water splashing around inside of it. He dumps the rice in and caps it off with a lid. He bumps his shoulder against Soap’s. Something about being out of the public made him friendlier, softer. If this is him trying, Soap could get on board with his apology.

“Smells good already, Soap,” Price wanders up to the island that acts as the last kitchen wall.

“You better be hungry, I don’t want this shite in my kitchen for a whole week.” He bumps Ghost with his hip and shifts his arm to make it seem like it had been an accident. Then he lowers his voice, “Are you going to eat?”

“Price is right, smells good,” He says, “Might have to.”

“Show your face?”

“Only the good parts.”

“Oi,” Gaz sets down three bottles from Soap’s stash – the whiskey, a bottle of tequila (a gift from Los Vaqueros), and a shimmering wine (a gift from his sister in America), “Do you have any glasses?”

“Top cabinet.”

Ghost reaches up, his shirt hitching and revealing the skin above his pants. Was he doing this on purpose? The low voice, the teasing, and now this? Or was Soap just down that bad?

“Cheers,” Gaz gives himself a hefty pour, bangs it on the counter, and swigs back a few ounces of straight tequila. He shakes his head. Price pours out three more regular-sized glasses.

“Here’s to the 141.” He holds his up, waiting for Gaz to pour himself another shot.

Ghost grabs his and hands one to Soap, “Here’s to Los Vaqueros.”

Soap clinks his glass against his, “To Ghost Team.”

Four glasses clink against the counter as they drink to their friends.

Soap spends a few minutes dumping rice, vegetables, and shrimp into bowls, not caring about the presentation. Heating it up properly is the best he’s got. Besides, it’s not like any of them planned to stay sober enough to actually care.

Price and Ghost settle on the couch while Soap takes the floor. Gaz sits in the last chair.

“I think you should get a dog,” Gaz says, chasing down his dinner with a wise cup of water.

“Why would I do that?”

“Dunno, this place screams dog.”

“I think maybe you just want to pet a dog.”

“I do,” Gaz points his fork at Soap, “I bet you had one growing up.”

“No. Everyone was too busy to properly care for one. Did you?”

“Nah, a cat. Loved her to death.” He points his fork at Price, “I think you had barn cats. And you,” He lands on Ghost, “Also a dog, but a tiny one. Probably followed you around.”

“Nope.”

“No.”

Price sips from a glass of whiskey in between bites of his food, “I have a turtle. Got him in secondary school. My neighbor takes care of him when I’m gone.”

“Snake.” Ghost says. His mask is folded up enough to reveal his thick lips, allowing him to eat and drink freely – something he didn’t even do in the cafeteria. A rush of pride flows through Soap looking at those lips. He’d kissed them before and he was going to do it again. “Hated that thing. Mean old git, just like his owner.” He grimaces, shoveling a large mouthful of food into his mouth.

“No. No, one of you is lying. There’s no way I’m oh-for-three.”

“Sorry mate.”

Soap cocks his head to the side, “A turtle?”

“Murdock,” He chuckles, but the joke is lost on Soap.

An hour later – the tequila is gone, the whiskey is on its last legs, and dishes are piled on the coffee table. Gaz is draped over the seat, legs hanging over the side. One arm covers his head. In a drowsy, partially slurred voice, he says, “I should call her.”

Price’s hat is pulled over his eyes. “Chess girl?” He murmurs.

“Yeah, Ntombi.” He snuffles, “She was really sweet.”

Ghost is still on the couch, but sitting upside down. His mask is properly situated on his face again. Every time someone speaks, his head turns lazily towards them. Soap’s struggling to keep his eyes open, lying on the ground with a throw blanket bundled under his head.

“Call her.” Soap says, “You have no idea how good it’ll feel.” His face goes warm thinking about holding Ghost’s face in his hands.

“Got something you want to say?” Gaz rolls over to better look at him. From his point of view, Gaz is upside down.

“Not. At. All.” Soap brushes the back of Ghost’s head.

“Boring.” Gaz’s head lulls to the side, his eyes fluttering, “I think I’m crashing here.”

Ghost swats at him, “You said you were going to try that shimmering shit, the wine.” He snaps.

Gaz kicks at him, just missing Ghost’s shoulder, “It’s not wine.”

“It’s not?” Soap’s voice cracks with sleepiness. A yawn hammers in the point.

“It’s fucking vodka mate.”

“I thought it was wine.”

Price pulls his beanie down even farther, covering his entire face. “Soap, tell you’re flat to stop spinning.”

“Stop spinning.”

“Good man.”

Soap closes his eyes for just a second. It’d hadn’t been a problem until Price said something, but the room had begun spinning. It hadn’t occurred to Soap until that moment, just how much he drank. Sure, it had been over the course of many hours with food and water imbibed as well, but it was still a lot and definitely more than he’d had in a while.

He snorts awake. Gaz and Price are still in their seats except Gaz is out, his face squished against the arm of the chair. Price may or may not be asleep. It’s impossible to tell. The only change is the empty spot where Ghost had been.

Soap grabs onto the couch and pulls himself off the floor.

Someone slaps his arm.

“Bedroom,” Price grumbles, “Move. I’m not sleeping sitting up.”

“Far be it for me to keep you up, Captain.”

True to his word, Price stretches out on the couch, groaning the entire time.

Soap's head clears relatively quickly once he's moving but he still has to lean against his furniture and walls. They shift around him. Everything's not quite right, the space too large in places and too small in others. The clock on the stove blinks at him in an angry red colour. 2 am? *Steamin' bloody Jesus.*

He opens the door to the bedroom, letting the yellow kitchen lights flood into the dark bedroom. Ghost frees his jacket from under Price and Gaz's coats.

Soap keeps his voice lowered, afraid of waking Gaz in the other room. The door clicks softly as he closes it.

"Are you leaving?"

Ghost shrugs his jacket on, "That was the plan."

Soap's bedroom is small and his chest is almost touching Ghost's. Any closer and he could feel the thump of Soap's heart. He's thankful that neither of them had considered turning on the lights.

Ghost's voice lowers to match his, "Do you not want me to?" And Soap can hear the smirk dripping off his words. His heart stops.

"Do you really have to ask?" Soap wants to draw every syllable out and match Ghost's teasing tone. All that comes out is sincerity.

"I guess I don't."

Ghost's jacket is unzipped and Soap wraps his arms around his middle, sliding his hands between the jacket and his shirt.

"Then stay." He says, resting his head on Simon's shoulder. He relaxes into Soap's touch. One arm wraps around him. The other reaches up and Simon removes his mask. There's so much warmth burning between them and Soap is content to breathe it in. He'd discovered that just holding him was enough.

"It seemed like you had a good time." Soap says, thinking about the looks and the smiles.

"I did. Nice to be able to let loose."

"Hmmm." Soap closes his eyes, burying his face in the crook of Simon's

neck. His face is flushed red and warm. The coolness of Simon's skin is a blessing.

"Johnny." Simon's voice is gravelly and low. Soap looks up and finds his eyes instantly. It was too easy as he had learned every centimeter of them before even realizing that was what he was doing. Soap caresses his chin, suppressing the jolt of electricity that goes down his spine as Simon leans into it. His hand roams. He wants to commit every texture and divot to memory. He feels the roughness of his stubble, the perpetual clammy coolness of his cheeks. His finger comes across a raised line that travels from just under Simon's cheekbone, across his nose, and stops just under his right eye. A scar. Soap dances his fingers across it. Simon flinches, but instead of pulling away, he grasps Soap's hand with his and guides it down his face. Soap brushes Simon's lips, feeling another small scar on his lip.

Simon turns his head into Soap's touch, pressing his lips against his thumb. He places a hand against the back of Soap's head, and pulls him close, pressing their lips together. So far, these were the kisses they'd shared. Small. Shy. Warm and new.

A heat builds in Soap's stomach, urging him to press forward. This wasn't a stolen kiss in a hospital bed or bathroom. This was something private. Something between just the two of them. But the fear overtakes him again, begging him to stop while he's ahead. He'd just gotten him back. If he lost him this soon, he didn't know what he'd do.

But surprisingly, Simon is pushing in, moving his hands to grasp Soap's face. He tilts his head, pulling his wonderful lips away from Soap's, pressing their foreheads together.

"I'll stay." His breath washes over Soap.

"Shut it," Soap whispers. He's missing his lips already even though they're millimeters away. "Just let me hold you."

Simon nods and closes the gap between them.

He doesn't know when they collapsed onto the bed, but Soap is pressing down on Simon, running his hands through his short jagged hair. Simon's hand slides up his back, under his shirt. He doesn't fight the shiver his cold fingers send through him. Every move they make is slow, deliberate and takes all Soap's concentration. It isn't about perfection. Perfection is easy because it comes in the form of every single one of Simon's touches. The way his fingers rest in the small of his back. The gentle way he pulls Soap's shirt over his head. The cold

of the room sweeps in for only seconds before they both disappear under the covers. Soap plays with the hem of Simon's sweater.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He asks softly. His body buzzes in anticipation but anxiety makes a path straight to his heart. Could this ruin everything they had just started to build? Was this too much, too quickly?

"I'm never sure of anything." Simon pauses, his hands resting on Soap's bare shoulders. "But yes." He sits as best as he can to allow Soap to pull his sweater off.

He spends a second just lying there, chest to chest with Simon, trailing his hands up and down his arms. There's a softness to his physique; a layer of fat protects the more hardened muscles underneath. Simon kisses his shoulder, his neck, his cheek, spreading love and warmth with each one. He feels every bump of every scar, even the ones from his tattoo. Those are fainter. He presses his lips to Simon's once again feeling the tug in his gut and deciding to trust it. It'd gotten him this far. Simon wraps his hand around the base of Soap's head, pulling him into a deeper kiss and filling him with an imagined sweetness, born of just being close. Simon rolls them onto their sides, not breaking their touch. Soap does though, taking a second to nip at his ear and relish in the sound it pulls from him. After that, well... that would stay between the two of them, wouldn't it?

Chapter End Notes

I'll be posting updates to my TikTok (where I also have art of Soap and Ghost with more to come) and my Tumblr. You can find me on both under the same name **saturnite0614**

Like I said before, I won't be regularly updating, but there are definitely more chapters to come full of plot and Soap/Ghost moments.

he's always knocking doors into my thoughts

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song I Don't Wanna Love Her by Niels Brinck

I posted chapter one a week ago at this point and the tentative plan is to post every Saturday. This is not a guarantee, but a goal. I have a good portion of the story written and am trying to post chapters with natural end and start points. Also, I've been going back and forth replaying Modern Warfare 2 (2022) and the OG Modern Warfare games, so I'm using those as inspiration as well.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoy the chapter angst and all.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Soap inhales deeply, taking in the warm scent of another person's skin. There isn't any other word to describe it except warm. That smell is the proof he needs to know that the night before wasn't a dream. He'd been afraid to open his eyes to an empty bed and empty flat. But he's not alone. There's a weight on his arm. When Soap does open his eyes, his breath is taken away.

Simon is turned away from Soap, his back pressed against his chest. His head is tucked under Soap's chin and his arm is draped over Simon, who clutches it against his chest. Soap flattens his palm and feels the thump of his heart beat, slow and steady. He's transported back to the bottom of a hole, hands on his chest, feeling his ragged breathing and unsteady heart. That memory fades away, making room for this one. Instead of blood, there is skin on skin, resting under covers. There are light kisses on Simon's shoulder and there's Soap sliding his hand out of his grasp. He'd come back, just a quick trip to the bathroom and he'd come back to be there when he wakes up.

Soap rolls off his bed and is about to open the door when a coldness seizes his chest.

He'd forgotten about Gaz, who was asleep on the floor the last time he saw him. He'd forgotten about Price, who was dozing on his couch before Soap left the room. Price might not still be there, but Gaz was out. His head whips towards his alarm clock. It's only 06:30. *Four*

hours? They'd only been asleep four hours? Soap shuffles around in the dark looking for his clothing. He isn't quite in the right state to confidently strut out naked. That required a trip to the bathroom first which meant it required clothes. Soap finds his pants and a jacket. As he slips it on, he realizes that it's much too large to be anything he owns.

Price is fumbling around the kitchen as Soap exits the room. He moves with small deliberate movements, closing cabinets as gently as possible.

"Hope I didn't wake you." He says.

Soap pulls the sleeves of Ghost's jacket down over his hands, "No. You looking for something?"

"A water cup."

Soap points to a cabinet over the sink and begins to side shuffle towards the bathroom. A few more feet and he'd be good.

"Are you hungry?" Price asks.

"Uh yeah, I'll make you something if you want. Just give me a sec." The prospect of cooking for a hungover Gaz and Price appeals to him. Such a mundane task but oddly very personal. Drinks and leftovers were one thing, breakfast was another.

"Mind if I do it? I need to clear my head and moving around will help."

Soap unsuccessfully tries to hide the grimace that comes to his face.

"What did Laswell tell you?"

Soap really couldn't get stuck in this conversation right now. He needed new clothes and at least a quick rinse before he'd be comfortable conversing with Price, who while a dear friend, was also technically his boss.

"The truth? Said you couldn't make a steak more appealing than pish."

Price guffaws, "You screw up one time, I swear."

"Not just Laswell who says it."

"You try making MREs taste good after eating them for two weeks

straight."

"Right."

"If I wasn't a guest in your home, Soap, I'd-"

"What?" Soap backs towards the bathroom door, "Batter me? Thought you were old and injured?"

He flips the light on finally safe in the bathroom. "Knock yourself out. Kitchen's yours." He calls out.

It takes one look in the mirror to realize his mistake. He hadn't grabbed any extra clothes. It's too late now. He gargles some water, cleans up some areas that should have been cleaned up last night. As he splashes his face with water, it clicks with him exactly what happened last night. Cold water drips off his face and onto the porcelain of his sink counter. A flurry of emotions take hold of him, all fighting for dominance. He can't put a name to any of them, but he knows they're all good. They are warm and fuzzy and he's grinning at his own reflection. Interesting how 24 hours ago, he'd rolled out of the same bed full of irritation and longing and now he couldn't wait to crawl back into it, even if it meant stomaching whatever abomination Price is making in the kitchen right now. But how could he stare at Ghost while eating breakfast without crawling into his lap? He splashes more water onto his face, shaking off the excess and wetting his hair.

Price is still digging around Soap's kitchen once he gets out. A pan falls from a cabinet onto the hard floor.

"Watch it, will you?" Gaz yells from his chair, hand over his eyes, "Bloody fucking hell."

Price looks at Soap, lips pursed, "Everyone's got an attitude around here this morning."

"I don't have an attitude. I'm feeling great." Soap leans against the fridge just as Price closes it.

He eyes Soap up and down. For some reason, the carton of eggs he's holding makes the action seem more even judgemental.

"How are you about to stand in my kitchen and give me that look?"

"Because it's my dog tags that say Captain and not Sergeant." He

smiles and turns his back.

Soap shakes his head and steps back into the bedroom, on the hunt for clean clothes and ones that actually fit. Although the jacket is nice both in texture and smell.

Ghost's still sleeping, the blankets exactly where Soap had left them. He approaches the bed and crouches in front of him. Being able to see his face is odd, but a good kind of odd – like how strange the brightness of the sun looks after it's been cloudy all day. Seeing him sleeping was even stranger.

"So you don't sleep with the mask on." He chuckles, soft enough as to not wake him. Just because everyone else only had four hours of sleep, doesn't mean he had to. Soap reaches out and brushes his cheek.

Ghost's breath hitches, and not in the fun way Soap had made it do last night.

His body tenses, freezing Soap in place. Ghost's eyes shoot open.

"Fucking hell, Johnny," He rolls onto his other side, "Don't do that."

"I didn't expect you to wake up like that."

Ghost stills.

"Ghost?"

In seconds, he goes from calm, albeit cranky, to heaving. His muscles shake trying to hide it, but Soap's too close. His hands are knotted in the sheets. Soap leans over him. Despite the heavy breathing, Ghost's eyes are dead, unfocused. Soap's been in the military long enough to know not to touch him.

"Simon," He says softly, "Tell me where you're at."

He closes his eyes, twisting the sheets in his white fists.

"Lt." Soap exhales and lies on the bed, careful not to touch Ghost until the last second. Then, he presses his back against Ghost's, letting his breathing be his guide. It's hard for Soap to not match Ghost's panicked breaths. The speed at which he inhales and exhales is a dangerous one, so fast you might not even see it. There is no oxygen entering and definitely none making it to his brain. *Focus on me.*

Soap counts under his breath. In and imagine your chest is a balloon.

Fill it until it's ready to pop. Hold it and make sure it doesn't. Out. 1. 2. 3. 1. 2. 3. 1. 2. 3.

Ghost's breathing begins to even out, matching Soap's steady count. Silence overtakes the space. In the world outside the door, Gaz stumbles around. The bathroom door closes. The sink turns on.

Soap swallows before he speaks, giving Ghost that indication that he's still there. "Do you want-"

"No." He snaps. His weight vanishes from Soap's back

The first thing Soap sees as he flips to his other side is Ghost tugging on his mask – not his pants, not his shirt, *the mask*. Every inch of his visible skin begins to pink. Soap watches helplessly as Ghost continues to get dressed. The scars on his back and legs stretch gruesomely in the darkness, as if they were fresh. A long jagged one twists and curls, like a long wicked smile. A taunt from Ghost's past. Soap catches a glimpse of the new burn scar across his ribs before Ghost pulls his sweater down.

He scoops his boots up and grasps the door handle. But he doesn't turn it. Instead, he gets his bearings, looking around the dark room before letting his eyes fall. The boots fall to the floor and Ghost sits on the edge of the bed.

Soap crawls towards him, stopping a foot away. Then he brushes Ghost's trembling arm. He flinches away.

"This is one of those things I'm not ready to tell you." His tone is very matter of fact, solid, rehearsed.

"But something you want to?"

Ghost nods.

"Is it about what happened last night? Can you tell me that?"

Ghost exhales, "It's complicated, Johnny, with a capital C. Just know it doesn't have to do with you."

"I get that," Soap pulls himself closer so he can sit next to him.

"It's not fair to you. But it's something I need to do."

"I know. Which is why I need to know if *I'm* something you need right now." He asks, pulling his hand away, "Because I can't keep myself

open and yearning for you. It's bad for both of us. If you need a friend, I'll be there. If you want this, need *this*, I'll be there. But you need to figure out which one you need right now or it's going to drive us both mad."

Ghost doesn't hesitate, "*This*."

"Are you sure?"

"You really do talk a lot," He throws his head back.

"It's the ADHD." He says plainly, "Answer the question."

"Truth Johnny? I don't *want* to want this. I don't want my every thought to be about you."

Soap's stomach falls. Should've known better, in all honesty. He feels like a fool. You don't wake up full of joy and actually have a good day. Starting from the top was just a fucking promise that your day was going to go straight to shit.

"Right, forgot I was talking to the Ghost." He doesn't hide the hurt in his voice. Truth be told, he doesn't want to hide it.

"It's easier to be the Ghost without you. But I do want this. I need this. If you'll let me." Ghost's voice is low, breathy. The words wash over him. He's being so fucking *soft* and it's breaking Soap. Inch by inch, word by word, he fragments, giving pieces of himself over to Ghost, filling all the cracks that exist within. But it's making the cracks in Soap larger. All the insecurities he's buried since childhood peek out with ugly little eyes, watching the rest of his world crumble around him and waiting for the moment when they can crawl out on little arachnid legs.

"Since when do you need anyone's permission to do anything?"

"I guess I don't." Ghost stands, "Did I answer your question?"

Soap stares at his knees, "...Yeah."

Ghost exhales, "You don't have to yearn, Johnny. I told you yesterday, I'm not stepping back."

Soap is at a loss for words, not made easier by the shaking in his knees. He'd somehow turned this into the insecurity power hour.

Ghost kneels in front of him, "I'll call you tomorrow." He whispers,

resting his forehead against Soap's, the mask is a layer between them. A single piece of fabric holds all his secrets. Funny how the mask had never really bothered him until this moment, probably because he didn't truly realize how much baggage it carried and he wore it like spiked armor.

He feels Ghost's lips against his head. A kiss like the last one you get before being kicked to your grave. Soap closes his eyes and listens. Ghost's footsteps are silent, but his exit from the bedroom isn't. Light spills onto Soap from the kitchen, turning the space behind his eyelids red before falling into darkness.

He pulls his sleeves over his hands, waiting for his front door to slam. He's still wearing Ghost's jacket.

Price is watching the door as Soap exits the room. Eggs sizzle in the pan in front of him.

Soap can't meet his gaze, "Did you hear any of that?"

He turns his attention back to breakfast, flipping one crispy egg over, "I heard only what you want me too."

Price waits for Soap to pull his eyes off the floor before he speaks again, "He'll be alright."

"Will he?"

Price dumps the eggs onto a plate and starts up two new ones, "We all will." He hands the plate to Soap.

Gaz steps out of the bathroom just as Price and Soap begin eating breakfast – fried eggs and some sausage Soap hadn't gotten around to cooking yet. He hadn't told Price, but he isn't sure when he bought that sausage and is quite wary to eat it. That's if he wanted to eat anything. He sniffs it. Smells fine.

"I'm not that bad of a cook, Soap." Price laments. Gaz's brow furrows as he nibbles on his eggs. His eyes shift nervously, unsure whether to believe his initial tasting. Price glares at him.

Soap sets the uneaten food on the coffee table next to last night's dinner bowls.

Price's gaze softens, but he remains silent. It's clear in his eyes that he knows exactly what's going on between Ghost and Soap. It might

benefit that man to be less observant. Gaz as well. His gaze shifts between the two of them as he shovels eggs into his mouth but he chews slowly, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallows.

"Am I missing something?"

"No." The two say at the same time. It's a dare from Soap and a promise from Price.

Gaz jaw works as he tries to settle on something to say. He lands on a drawn out, "Right. Anyway..."

"Halloween." Price interrupts.

Gaz slices into his last egg, spilling golden yoke onto the black plate, "What about it?"

"Soap was thinking about a party of sorts. That's what you were missing." He lies.

Gaz gets a far away look in his eye as if he's looking at someone or something in a different dimension. It's an exasperated look. He sees the various threads of tension spinning outwards from Soap, obviously wanting somebody to step up and let him in on their causes. But he's also not an asshole. Soap's tense muscles and Price's abrupt lying probably told him enough to not press it.

"A party?" He asks instead, going along with it. He really is the best mate.

"Yeah," Soap glares at Price who smiles innocently, "It's not often we actually get to celebrate holidays as they come our way."

"What do people even do at Halloween parties? And is it even a party if there's only four people? Like we're not university students or teenagers."

"Four?"

Gaz drags a bit of sausage through the yoke, "Ghost. Figured you'd invite him. Or is he why you and Price are being weird."

Nevermind, he was the type to bring it up.

"You know him." Soap slides a sausage link across the plate, doing his best to act nonchalant. Try to convince Gaz there was nothing he was missing.

“That errand I had to run last night?” Price says, “It was dragging him out of his flat. If it were up to him, he’d hibernate until our leave ended.”

“Forget I asked.”

“Gladly.” Soap returns to his breakfast as it’s the only thing he can do. And yeah, he had to give it Price. Laswell had been exaggerating. That or it really was impossible to screw up simple eggs and sausage.

Price clears his throat, “To answer your original question, Gaz, you drink at parties. Maybe watch a movie then you drink some more. Preferably something better than Soap already has on hand.”

"BYOB." Gaz and Price taps forks in a sign of mutual agreement.

A notification dings on Gaz's phone. His chewing slows as he stares at it, then his eyes widen. “It’s Ntombi.”

“Plot twist.” Soap wolfs down the first egg, not realizing how hungry he actually was.

“She wants to get lunch.”

“I’d say yes, if I were you.”

“Where does she want to take you?” Soap asks with his mouth full, grateful that conversation is no longer on him or on Ghost. Yesterday, he’d set out to stop thinking about him and actually enjoy his time off. Just when he’d gotten to that point, Ghost had to come waltzing back in, like he’d never left. Like he’d been hanging around like a fucking ghost.

Stop, focus on someone else’s love life for once. It’s sitting right there, juicy and new and shiny.

Gaz sets his plate down, taking a second to type something in his phone, “A bookstore, by the looks of it.”

“How millennial of you two.” Price jokes.

Soap chuckles, but had to agree with Ntombi on this one. Bookstores were quiet. Unlike department stores, there were no expectations when you stepped inside one.

“Say yes, Gaz. At least get some better food in you.”

Price bites the inside of his cheek, glaring hard. He takes a pointed bite of his breakfast.

"I don't want to get her hopes up," His face falls, "Say it goes well and we end up really hitting it off. In five months, I say goodbye and then don't see her for months. I worry enough about leaving you lot behind if I die, I don't need another." He swallows, "Everyone deserves better than that."

"You said that last night." Price says,

"Because it's true. Because it's what I have to think about."

"But that's under the assumption you're going to die and I wouldn't let that happen." Price adds. His voice is low.

"We wouldn't." Soap sets his jaw, "And if you like her or even think you do, it will eat at you. Make you dumb. Either way, you're fucked so you might as well try to enjoy it."

"Was... was that supposed to be encouraging?"

Price narrows his eyes, shooting Soap a look he knows well. *We're talking about this.*

"Encouraging." Soap mumbles.

Gaz sighs, "Fine." He shoots back his response, shoving the phone under his leg, "This does mean I need to head out and get ready."

"It's not even eight yet, what time does she think lunch is?"

He stands, groaning at the stiffness in his back . Funny how they could sleep on hard cots and even harder ground, but sleep in a chair once and your back is fucked. Gaz doesn't speak until his plate is in the sink.

"At a normal lunch time. The problem isn't her, it's me. Although last night was fun, I'm also miserable right now. I need a shower. At least a two hour nap. Then probably another shower just for good measure."

"You complain a lot when you're not in uniform."

"Your kind words do wonders. My hangover is cured." Gaz collects his things from the table and pats Soap's shoulder, "Text me when you've got your party sorted out."

“Will do. Be safe.”

“You know I will.”

This is it, the perfect moment for Price to bring up the elephant in the room. But he doesn't. Instead, they finish their meals in silence, built from residual hangovers and mutual respect. So large and uncomfortable is the unmentioned pachyderm, the sounds of wet chewing are preferable. Even though that normally makes him want to rip his fingernails out. Still does, but again, preferable to airing out certain emotions.

The silence continues into the kitchen as Soap gets a start on the dishes.

His phone buzzes against his thigh and for the first time, he sees Ghost's name on the screen.

Ghost: Home safe.

Followed by three dots as he types more.

Ghost: I'm sorry.

Soap tosses his plate in the sink with a huff, forgetting that Price is next to him. If he'd hoped for continued avoidance of the topic, he'd failed with maintaining, giving Price too much of a hint on how it affected him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Price is gentler with his. He leans on the sink, facing Soap, looking very much like his football coach when he was younger.

“Do I have a choice?”

“You do.”

“But there's only one right one?”

He shrugs.

Soap grabs the dish soap off the back of the sink, keeping his gaze on it. He really had no choice. “I'm lost, Price. I've never been this fucking *lost*.” Soap turns the sink on and begins scrubbing at the plates. The water reaches scalding temperature in seconds. He watches it flow down his hands and on the plates, rinsing away the mess. If only it could do that to his mind. If only a scalding shower would

wash away the memories of the last month, the memories of last night.

“Simon’s got you in that much of a tizzy?”

“Every time I think I know where I stand with him, he does something I would have never imagined. He’s touchy one moment then ignoring me the next. Things would have been better if I’d stayed stupid.” Whenever he comes close, Soap gives him a part of himself and whenever he leaves, Ghost takes it with him.

He scrubs hard at the drying bits of food, cursing himself once again for catching feelings.

“Because that’s the thing, I hadn’t even *realized* I thought of him in that way until a month ago and yet these feelings are all encompassing. They’re suffocating me and there is nothing I can do about it. I try to talk to him and I know there are things there holding him back, holding us back. And since I know I can’t stop myself from feeling this way, I’m left not knowing what to do. So I’m lost and I’m stupid and it’s... I don’t know who’s fault it is. Right now I’ve settled on me.”

He hadn’t breathed once in between sentences and now that he does, his lungs ache. His head is fuzzy and he has to blink a few times to get his vision to focus. He is also so relieved to have someone to talk to about this. So relieved that he can’t even be bothered to care that it’s Price he’s venting his relationship problems to. At this point, anything was better than scribbling in a journal like he had the first two days he’d been home. Pencil lead and paper didn’t hold the same weight to a person sometimes. He could regret it later with a number of other things.

“Are you done with your rant?”

“You asked if I wanted to talk. You don’t get to complain just because I agreed.”

Price raises his hands, “I didn’t want to interrupt you. So, I ask again, are you done?”

Soap sits for a moment, letting the hot water turn his skin pink. “For now.”

“Good. Now it’s my turn. You can’t fix him.”

"Sir?"

"You. Cannot. Fix. Him. That barrier you feel between the two of you is something he put up for his own reasons. It's the tape that's holding him together. We all have it."

"What do you know?" *About him? About me? About anything? Tell me everything.*

"Nothing I'd tell you. That's his place. But I can tell you this. Humans? We don't want to *be* fixed. We like being broken. We like cracks. They let in the light that is other people. But sometimes those cracks get too big, so we fill them in with concrete so they stop growing. We're like pavement in that way. It doesn't stay crisp and solid. It crumbles and when it does, life comes back in. Against all odds, a plant grows through the cracks. All we ask is that others don't trample it."

Soap rinses the plates, finally freeing his hands from the onslaught of burning water. They're bright red now, dry, and tight.

Price gently places a towel in his hands, holding it there.

"Ghost is on his own journey. And he's doing it for *you*. Because once that plant makes it past the pavement, it needs the sun. He doesn't need you to tear down his walls. He just needs you to be there when he does it himself. That's what we all need."

He pats Soap's shoulder, "You're a good kid. You just need a little patience."

Soap shuts the water off. Some food he'd missed settles in the drain, slowing the progress of the receding soapy water.

"Never been my strong suit, sir. Wouldn't be here if it was."

The hand that had been resting on Soap's shoulder now slaps him instead of a gentle pat, "You and Gaz both have the same mouth, cheeky bastards the both of you."

"Where do you think we learned it from?"

"Careful, Soap. There's more to this conversation that needs to be had, but that requires more professional settings. Right now, just breathe. Enjoy your leave. You never know when we'll get another one."

Price's forced motivational speech had been helpful. Less so in the way

he wanted it to be, and more in that he gave Soap something to do that wasn't anxious pining and wallowing in self-pity. Was this new thing shitty? Yes, yes it was. The last time he'd been to a party was secondary school. He also wasn't the party planner and now thanks to Price, he had to idle in a corner shop looking for party things, whatever those were. Booze would be easy. But what made a Halloween party different from others?

Wait, how was this helpful again?

Oh yeah, not thinking about Ghost. He could party plan if it meant having his thoughts revolve around something else. It was a mission and maybe treating it as such would yield some results. An important part of any mission is having the proper gear. If you were planning on a party – activities, dancing, and such, – you needed the proper tools.

Soap starts with snacks, tossing bags of American candy into his basket. The Shadows had turned out to be a bunch of traitorous bastards, but they did have one thing going for them, and that was their stashes of candy. Most of it burned Soap's mouth in an oddly satisfying way and aside from chocolate, none of it tasted like it claimed to. He throws some crisps and a vegetable tray in there for good measure. They had those at parties, right?

Shit, he was getting old.

But you know who wasn't? His sister. Melanie was a few years younger than him and had graduated from Yale just last spring before deciding to pursue a doctorate. She'd probably be asleep, America being five hours behind them.

He decides to try anyway. His phone rings as he stares at liquors, trying to figure out which ones are appropriately spooky. It takes a few rings before a groggy voice picks up.

"John?" The way she says his name is tinged in confusion.

"Hey Mel."

"Are you alright?" Her voice gets louder and she speaks faster, "Did something happen?"

He chuckles, "No. I'm actually on leave."

"For fuck's sake, John " She coughs off to the side, "I thought you were going to tell me you got your leg blown off or something."

"No, they actually have someone else to call in that case. I'd probably just text you."

Her accent is distinctly more American than it had been. Combined with the poor phone audio, she didn't sound like the Melanie he was used to. The realization left a thick feeling on his tongue – heavy and cotton-like.

"Dick. You think you're funny?"

"Can't be when I'm competing with your face."

"I'm going to hang up unless you are dying right now."

"Only on the inside. I actually called because I'm having an impromptu Halloween get together."

"I hope it wasn't to invite me."

"No. Cool kids only."

"Then why did you wake me up?"

"I'm not the party kid I once was, I need ideas."

"Fancy dress?"

"Negative on that front. Not that type of party."

"A Halloween party with no costumes?"

"Rog."

"That's good. You don't need a costume anyway, you're scary looking enough with that mohawk."

"Keep it up and I'm going as you."

"You're not tall enough."

"Fuck you, Melanie."

There's the sound of movement just under Melanie's garbled laughter. The phone is too close to her mouth the next time she speaks.

"How involved are we talking with this party?"

"Not sure. Something small, there's not a lot of us."

"Anything?"

"Yes."

White noise crackles through the speaker then the sound of liquid hitting something. Melanie takes a loud sip of whatever she just poured.

"I don't know, a fucking movie? Maybe get pissed. You're all adults."

"Very helpful" Soap shoves two new bottles of whiskey and one of tequila into his basket.

"Well I don't know. Find some fun games online. The parties I go to are ones where the only activities are drinking and dancing because there's a hundred drunk college students. Not, like, three old people."

Soap sighs and pulls the phone away from his ear long enough to look up some quick Halloween game ideas. The first few links are crafts for children. As tempting as they are, he's going to have to decline.

Though he does make a mental note of it. The image of Gaz, Ghost, and Price hunched over a coffee table making ghosts out of coffee filters is enough to genuinely make him smile.

"Very helpful, Mel." He groans instead.

"I don't need the sarcasm this early in the morning." She pauses and clicks her tongue, "Wait, I think I have something. Do you remember that thing we used to do when we were little?"

"We did a lot of things."

"No, this was Halloween specific. Dad would have a bucket of candy in his lap and we'd watch a movie. We'd have to scare him during the movie to earn one. We were so bad at it, but he'd still pretend to be scared until we had the bucket split between us. That was always my favorite."

How the fuck did she remember that? She could barely wipe her own ass when they stopped that tradition. The fondness in her voice triggers a vague collection of memories from Halloween's past, sandwiched between his father and the arm of the sofa with some children's Halloween movie playing, whatever he could find at a rental store. He and Melanie had spent more time scaring each other than scaring him and yet, the bucket he kept on his lap was always split evenly between both his children. They slept in the living room

those nights, snuggled in blankets still wearing their costumes.

No matter how warm those memories are, they are always followed with the memory of the day they stopped – the day his father told him to grow up. The first of many traditions to end in that manner.

But she had to pull the favorite card. Soap swallows back the lump in his throat. He didn't miss his sister often. Not because he hated her or anything. Quite the opposite. Life had been bearable because she'd been there. She was also doing what she loved, far away from their parents. Hard to want her near when he was stuck in warzones. But because they couldn't talk often, there weren't many chances to touch base with each other.

"Yeah, I remember. Thanks." *For the suggestion. For remembering the good things. For being there when I called.*

"No problem." She yawns, "John, I love you, but I have to go and be a person. Unlike you, I have classes and assignments."

"Good luck with those."

Someone speaks off to the side, too far for the microphone to pick it up. Static overtakes the speakers as if Melanie had put her hand over the microphone.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"I said 'good luck.' Who was that?" He finally selects a few more bottles to replenish what he and others had finished the night before. Well, everyone except Ghost.

"Uh," she swallows audibly, "A roommate."

"Oh." *Why the pause?*

"Thank you for the luck, but I don't need it. I'll talk to you later. Love you, bye."

"Bye?" But the call has already fallen silent, the red call ended sign blinking underneath the photo of his sister and him.

The two look like twins in many aspects – height, hair, eyes. It's uncanny, always has been. The photo was one he didn't look at often. It was too much of a reminder of what he had to lose if he died on the field. Before Simon, it was only Melanie that kept him from...from

what? He didn't know.

Melanie holds up her shiny new diploma wearing her shiny black robes. Her cocksure smile mirrors Soap's exactly, just flipped around. Her black hair hangs loose, down to her hips with small braids hidden throughout.

She was always the more serious of the two of them. *Ghost and her would get along, I bet.*

Stop it. Stop it with the domestic bullshit, Soap.

Ghost had crawled his way under Soap's skin like an infection. And like an infection, he left his thoughts muddled, his body hot, and his heart aching. Whenever you tried to forget about it – watching a movie, reading a book – it hit you with a dizziness that reminded you it was there. And eventually, it got so bad that you learned to love it. You loved how it blurred the lights in your room or the way it made simple things like water and salted crackers taste infinitely better. You became high on it, a byproduct of your inflamed brain. But eventually you had to kill that infection or it would kill you.

The problem with this particular metaphor is that Soap is still stuck in the high and in love stage. His brain is inflamed, flooded with feelings for Simon and he doesn't want to kill the infection, and knows he never will. He thinks he can evolve into something that can live with it instead of being consumed by it. Ghost is the caregiver that forces him into the cool showers to lower his body temperature. He forces the medicine that tastes of oil down his throat, reminding him that this isn't good for him. But Soap fights it, blanketing himself in fever to the detriment of his own deteriorating body.

Ghost didn't want him yearning. He didn't want this fever for him. But he wanted Soap. He'd said so himself and that was the problem. Ghost was something he could have. He was this close, but yet still so far away. There's too much distance not between Soap and Ghost, but between Simon and himself. And it is because of this distance that Soap knows he can't actually have him like Ghost promised. How do you find parts of yourself that you deliberately severed and allowed to drift into the infinite eternity of the past and future?

Soap finishes the whiskey once he gets home, letting the umber liquid burn the entire way down. His own personal medication against the disease of love.

He didn't even want to call it love. After all, what did he know of it?

Was love soft touches and even softer words? Was it physical attraction? Was it even something you could define or even see? Did you have to be well versed in it by the time you died? They'd only known each other for a year. Is that too little of a time? Is it too long? Too many unknowns that nursing alcohol couldn't shed some light on. All he knew of it was the weight of it on his chest when he thinks of Simon's hand on his back or arm or shoulder, regardless of the context. It didn't matter if it happened in his bed or on the field, it meant something to him. Every interaction meant something now. It would depend on when you asked him whether this is a good thing or not. He didn't fucking know anything anymore.

Except for the feeling of homesickness. In the middle of the city in the country he hadn't been born in, he couldn't find home. There's no Melanie waiting in the other room. There's no football pitch or wet hunting blind to hide out at. Everything is scattered and wrong. This was another one of those things that was easier to hide from when he was deployed. There is no hiding on your shitty sofa with a bottle of whiskey trapped between your burning thighs.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the length of the chapter and choppiness I guess. The main goal of this one is to set up things in later chapters. I also initially planned to post all this as a single chapter but I need this to hold me accountable. Reminder of my Tumblr and TikTok, all under the same name (saturnite0614).

Hope you guys enjoy the Soap Lore as well. I've seen so many great interpretations of his home life that I am a bit intimidated adding mine to the pile.

my best excuse is that i'm drained from everything that keeps me sane

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song I Am by Drowning Pool

I have plans that I am not sharing because the haters will sabotage me. I have plans-

Anyway, early chapter because it's done and I'm impatient. Happy angst.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

26 October 2023|Gym|13:00:22|John MacTavish

Finishing the whiskey hadn't been a bad idea. The bad idea was letting it be the only thing he'd imbibed for the rest of the day. He'd awoken early in the morning with a vicious headache, worse than the concussions he'd suffered through in the past. He'd laid with his head buried in his pillow, unable to think about anything but pain and his churning stomach. The dim light that managed to make its way through Soap's curtains hurt his eyes even with them closed. The darkness was too bright. He'd rolled out of his empty bed, ignoring the ache that came at seeing no one next to him. By the time the pain had subsided enough for him to stand, it was well into the day. The place was clean and his skin itched with cabin fever. He missed the adrenaline of his daily life and was tired of languishing both mentally and physically.

It's why he stepped into a gym for the first time in a while. It was a small local hole in the wall, easily mistaken for a bar from the outside. What helps the mistake is the amount of people inside of it. Small places are easy to crowd, this place being a prime example. There are people at every piece of equipment. Those not working out currently watch a friendly boxing match. Closing his eyes, Soap could easily imagine himself back on base. The scuffing of trainers is the same no matter where he is. The sweat and cleaner in the air help wrap Soap in comfort. The only thing missing is the scent of gun oil.

Soap posts up at a free punching bag. The few there are already in use by people who look like regulars. They don't flinch at the movements around them, too busy holding conversations with those

next to them. They look at Soap like a welcome disruption. A few cast nods his way with small friendly waves before resuming their usual activity. He returns the nod, although much stiffer. It's easy to come off as friendly when you're among others who are just as closed off and awkward as you are. Compared to Ghost, Soap was an outright extrovert. Compared to the rest of the world? No such luck. He didn't know them.

Soap tosses his bag on the ground then digs around for his boxing tape. When he punched people, it was always with his bare hands so he was used to the broken fingers and knuckles, sure that whatever future scientist that found his bones would be quite concerned. If only they could know the rest as well.

And while he was used to it, it didn't mean he welcomed it. So he used tape and no gloves. Wrapping his hands was a comfort he didn't know he needed. The texture is familiar, if annoying, especially once he got sweaty, but familiar nonetheless. The tightness is also welcome.

He'd drawn looks when he first entered, but the real looks came once he started his workout. He begins by testing the strength of the bag. It's good and strong, well affixed to the ceiling above him. You could usually trust places like these. The people and items within are well cared for, passed through families not made of blood. They weren't motivated by money. He'd paid a small fee upon entering but is already planning on tipping on the way out. Places like this deserve at least that much.

Kids grow up at the heels of their parents at places like these. Soap often wishes he himself had, instead of the office buildings of his father's work. Here people built a community. At offices, you found only competition. When you cut your teeth there, you learned only to inject poison into every action. And when your oldest child shows promise, you fold him in and when it's clear he no longer makes the cut, you kick him out then remind him of it with every glance.

Soap's punches grow in ferocity. Sweat builds quickly at the small of his back. The same place Ghost's murderous fingers gently danced across only two nights before. The stares increase as he over-exerts himself.

Brutish, is what his mother would call it.

You're too smart to be running around like that, John.

His fingers pop.

A physical being spends too much of his mind that he ends up mindless. Is that what you are, John?

The bag swings outwards. He body checks it, stumbling backwards.

Football is ruining your grades. If you'd spend at least half that energy on school, you wouldn't be struggling.

This time, it's his elbow that pops.

I won't help a man who won't help himself, John.

He punches with his off hand, sending the squeaking bag flying away again. Soap's face is buzzing with adrenaline, so sorely missed. The bag flies back right into him. Tears immediately spring to his eyes as the tough material bashes his nose and he flies backwards onto dirt, shrapnel raining down on him.

Soap covers his head, looking frantically for Ghost. His jaw trembles as he searches for his blood stained balaclava.

He spies a pair of trainers near his face instead. A face follows them as their owner kneels down.

"You alright mate?"

Soap's still in the gym, fighting for his life on a disinfectant soaked mat.

"I'm sound." He grits, forcing the words out. And he hopes the stranger attributes his shakiness to his fall.

He holds a hand out and grunts as he lifts Soap up.

Now everyone is staring. Their eyes burrow into his flesh, digging for the hidden trauma underneath.

He swallows dryly, just now registering that the stranger is still talking to him, "What?"

"I said your phone is ringing. Are you sure you're alright? You're pale."

"Yeah, just let myself get distracted. Thanks."

"No problem."

Soap swipes his bag off the ground and rifles around the side pocket

for his phone, expecting Price's name and photo to blink back at him. It would be just like the old man to call him in a moment of panic and humiliation.

His already limited breath catches.

Ghost's name glows on the screen.

Infection.

Soap lets the phone continue to ring as he shoves himself in a corner. Some people are still looking at him, but many have moved back to their previous activities. The look of concern on their eyes is... something. Those closest try to meet his eye but instead see the tattoo on his forearm. Their looks of concern turn to nods of what they probably think are understanding.

He accepts the call and holds it to his ear, trying to get his breathing back under control. He's in the gym, not a snowy battlefield. He hasn't been for a few weeks now.

"...Johnny?"

That gentle sweetness that Soap hadn't known Ghost to be capable of before that night, almost a year ago now, creeps through the phone speaker just to kiss Soap's ears.

"Hey." Is all he can give, breathless. His voice cracks. A sharp pain spikes in his arm.

"You solid?"

No, I'm no longer built for this environment. I need to get back there.

"Yes. You?"

Ghost sighs directly into the microphone. The sound crackles and booms.

"As I can be."

"Are you calling just to ask?"

"No. I need a few more days to collect my thoughts."

"Thoughts on what?"

"On you, Johnny. There's a lot of them."

Same here, Ghost.

"People like us? We're not used to that," He continues, "It's a shitshow."

"You said it."

"I said I wanted you to be better than me. Well, you are. You're honest. And brave as hell. Wish I had a little of that bravery in me."

"You have it, Lt. Where do you think I learned it from?"

"Flattered Johnny. Give me a few days. Want to show you I'm worthy of a man like you."

"Isn't that up for me to decide?"

"A few days. You can hunt me down after that."

"I'll hold you to it."

"Counting on it."

"Well count on this too," Soap swallows, "I meant everything I've said to you. Everything."

A small chuckle, "I know that. You wear it on your sleeve."

"That's the problem."

"Not for me. I'll see you soon." Then the call goes silent. Only a few seconds long. The time on the phone call blinks at him, as if to mock him then the screen goes dark. Leaving him to question if the call had even happened.

He'd read somewhere that hope was a bird, resilient and yet always battered.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers.

It explained the flutter in his chest. Feathery wings beat with every soft promise that Ghost makes, fighting against the storm that is his distance.

And what's not fair about this whole thing, is this victimization Soap

feels. If he were capable of being rational right now, he'd see that Ghost is trying. He knows that. It's immature to think that him and Ghost are the same person or are at the same place right now. If he were a perfect person, he could sit by in patience while Ghost worked through whatever he needed to. He could wait because who wears a mask like that all the time if they didn't have something to work out?

But he wasn't patient. Who truly was >

His feathery hope was born in crisis. It was born in the rain on the streets of Mexico, fed only by the gravelly tones of Ghost in his ears. His voice and eyes are all it knows. Now it's hammering for more. It wants to know it's not going to starve once the winter comes. Soap wanted that. He wanted to know that after Ghost collected himself, he'd let Soap in. He liked being an anchor, someone you could count on. After years of being the family disappointment, he was finally someone to be proud of. Simon was proud of him, but it felt hollow when he wasn't around. He was just another soldier with a puffed up chest.

It's codependent, is what it is.

That itch to break his fingers comes back. Stop thinking about your issues. Move on. Grow up.

Soap repeats this mantra the entire walk home. The cold air strikes at the sweat cooling on his back. It's sticky, gluing his clothes to him, like shrink-wrap. Like bandages soaked in blood.

A bad fucking day. He was having a bad fucking day. He'd gone to the gym to shut off his brain and only succeeded in bringing everything to the surface. The type of thoughts that tend to hit most around the winter holidays, not Halloween.

The thoughts that make you want to throw up if you even touch them. They make you hate yourself because only a dumb fuck like you would be bothered by them. Made you feel like a narcissist for even *daring* to give a single shit about how you feel. Why couldn't you just be grateful that he bothered to call? Or that both of you were even alive? How dare you ask for more?

You don't verbalize these because the one time you did, your parents called you spoiled.

Soap slams his flat's door shut and dumps his bag on the ground. His clothes are off before he's even in the bathroom. He turns the shower

to the hottest possible setting and climbs inside. It pours down, peeling away the sweat, burning his scalp and eyes. Yet every part of him trembles.

Why couldn't he move on?

Why couldn't he be patient?

Soap sinks to the shower floor and lets the darkness take over him. He pulls his knees to his chest and hyperventilates.

He wasn't good at all. He wasn't brave. He was a fragile glass man, superglued together too many times to count.

Cracks in the pavement.

But Soap wasn't seeing a lot of light.

His tears mix with the water pouring down his reddening skin. If he could wash away every trauma, both physical and mental, he would. He'd scrub until he found a better person.

But a better person isn't you.

Was that a bad thing?

Soap's mind begins to slow.

That better person is a stranger. An idol. That's what his parents had wanted.

Melanie never asked for an idol. She asked for a brother.

Price never asked for an idol. He wanted Soap as is.

Alejandro and Rodolfo never asked for an idol. They welcomed Soap as a brother.

Simon never asked for an idol. Only time.

And Soap had never asked for anything. Not until now.

He asked for Simon.

And Ghost said yes.

That wasn't selfish.

They all had time. An unusual thing for him. Having time. There was no bomb they had to attend to. No life ending event nipping at their heels.

That bird that worried it was going to starve was still young. It didn't know that it was safe now and time was affordable.

Soap turns the water down to a more acceptable temperature and finishes wiping away the day.

It strikes him that he should probably get a therapist.

Add that to the list of things he needed.

November 2022

We dream every night but only remember a few moments, if luck is with us. Luck is a neutral force that flows throughout the universe, as invisible as air. Because of its neutrality, it often is seen as mysticism instead of something natural. We attribute the events we don't like to bad luck and the ones we do to good luck. Those who don't do either, chalk it all up to skill.

But that's like believing air is purely oxygen or that any singular movement of your body is controlled by a single muscle. Luck works with everything to form the events or our lives. Everyone has good and bad luck. No one is lucky.

John considered it good luck when he didn't dream, regardless of whether they were pleasant or nightmares. But seeing as consistency in luck is unnatural, as is a solid month of good weather, it makes sense that he'd begin to remember the things he'd dreamt. That bad luck combined with the stress of his disorganized mind.

The rain had stopped, leaving the earth around Las Almas a muddy mess that stuck to the tires of the truck. Ghost had slowed down. He still hadn't told Soap where they were going.

Dreams often have more coherent narratives than we tend to give them credit for. Our broken memories of the night give us the impression that dreams have gaps in plot and leaps in logic.

Soap's arm had begun to hurt again. The adrenaline ebbed away, no longer needed to keep him alive. Ghost turned off onto an even smaller dirt road. The bushes and trees leaned towards the car with their dripping leaves, browning at the edges and already dead. Soap leaned his head against the

cool window. The condensation dripped down onto his forehead. Like the condensation, blood dripped from his arm in a steady stream, running over his fingers as he pressed as firmly as he could.

This was all real. This had happened.

For the first time since they'd escaped, Ghost looks over at him. In the darkness, his eyes are unreadable. Two black pools in the bone white of his mask. The grim reaper, come to take Soap away.

He reached out and rubbed his shoulder, sending a bone chilling wave over him.

"We'll stop here." His voice was far away. It crackled as if it were still coming over a radio and not right next to him.

Soap nodded, letting his head lull back towards the window. One half of him burned from the heat in his arm. The other half froze.

"Chin up, sergeant." He hopped out of the cab. The squelching of his boots into the mud reminded Soap of bloody muscle and tissue. The area he could see through the window tinted red, a fibrous texture taking over. Blue lines pulsed with flowing blood.

"You showed them who's boss." He opened Soap's door, holding him up.

"Couldn't have done it without you."

Ghost chuckled at that. He set his pack on the truck step, holding it in place with a bent knee.

As he dug around in his pack, Soap said, "You gonna dig the bullet out? Like a strapping military doctor?"

"Come now, Johnny, you and I both know that's movie nonsense. Kill you faster that way."

"You're the only one allowed to make jokes?"

Ghost pressed a clean bandage to the sticky wound as he searched around for some more supplies.

"Can you hold this here? Good boy." He pulled off his black bloodied gloves and set them aside, pulling out a small bottle of purified water. Soap removed the bandage long enough for him to pour the water down his arm. It washed away the newest blood but barely made a dent in that which had already dried and turned brown. Ghost placed a new bandage on top of it

and snapped on some nitrile gloves. He set about stitching up the wound.

In real life, it had stung. He remembers the cold needle, freshly disinfected, piercing his inflamed skin. In the dream, he watched from afar. The needle went through his skin like cotton.

Ghost worked with laser focus, his large hands moving deftly. The ground breathed around them, pushing the foliage up and down. He settled into the rhythm as if we're a part of the earth itself.

He finished with the last stitch, and reached towards his mask. He pulled it up. The fabric peeled away his skin, strings of red strain against the force Ghost applied. The cream white of bone peaked through the dripping gory musculature. The lower half of a grinning skull stared up at him.

Ghost put the end of thread between his bare teeth and broke it, tying it off to finish the patch up.

Soap looked up and could finally see his eyes. Instead of dark brown he'd become accustomed to, they were milky white. The area around them sunken and receded, growing taut around bone.

"You solid?" He chattered.

"No."

Blood blossomed on Ghost's side, soaking through his coat and jeans.

"You will be." He patted Soap's shoulder with a skeletal hand.

"Will you?"

"No."

He stepped back from the truck, slamming the door in Soap's face. Instead of the sound of the door sealing and locking, an explosion rings out. His vision is blinded, everything going white.

Soap's eyes shoot open, finding only the darkness of his pillow. The cotton case is stuck to his face by sweat. Or is it blood? It's always blood. His. Ghost's.

His chest aches, bruised by his racing heart. He'd pulled his limbs in close during his restless sleep. His arms are buried under him, fists clenched up by his chin. The cold air of his flat blankets him, instead of his bedding. That is tangled up around his feet. Despite the tightness in his chest that restricts his already strained breathing, he

can't move. Can't pull his limbs away. They're locked in place. The perfect freeze response.

His joints crack as he forces himself to move anyway. It was going to be a very long few days.

The nightmares continued every night. Plenty had him back in Las Almas either alone or with a decaying Ghost. Others, he was in Chicago and instead of Hassan pushing him out the building, it was Ghost, his eyes cold and dead. The wind would rush past him just like it had when he and Ghost had fallen back in September.

The worst were the ones where he was pressing the burning knife against Ghost's skin, and he wouldn't stop. He just kept pushing until it burned a hole in his skin. Ghost didn't scream, Soap did. And he woke with the smell of burnt flesh filling his apartment. The smells are always what lingered.

A few sleeping pills ensured that he could have a least one night of fucking peace.

That left him groggy but unbothered by new dreams. He couldn't handle another night of looking at corpses. He couldn't handle the smells that permeated his apartment – blood, burnt skin, decaying corpses, and mold.

Rationally, he knew it wasn't there. He knew that these smells weren't what stole his breath and made his heart race. But rational thinking never actually helped because the mind wasn't wholly rational.

He ended up deep cleaning his bathroom to at least trick his mind. He was on his hands and knees, scrubbing the bottom of his shower when his phone rang. He doesn't bother to see who it is before he answers, shoving it under his chin as he continues to clean.

"This is Soap."

A familiar voice comes through, "That's how you answer a phone, Johnny."

The phone falls and cracks against the floor.

"Shit!"

Three days. It'd taken him three days. Had they been as bad as Soap's?

Restless and overwhelming?

"You alright?" Ghost asks.

"Dropped my phone."

"Clumsy boy."

"Did you call just to make fun of me?"

"This conversation is giving me deja vu."

"Maybe because we had it a few days ago."

"I didn't want to lose my nerve."

"I didn't think you could, sir."

"We learn new things about ourselves everyday, Johnny. I'm sending you an address. Meet me there." It comes out as an order, something that Soap had learned he did when he was nervous. He'd done it in the bathroom with that poor bar-goer.

His phone beeps with the message, but surprisingly, the call doesn't end there.

"I'm trusting you, Soap." He says, "I also want you to know you can trust me."

"Save it," He responds softly, "I want to hear it from your mouth, in person."

"Rog that."

That silly thing called hope flies again.

29 October 2023|Café|16:09:10|John MacTavish

The address is for a café. It's too far to be someplace Soap would frequent. He wonders why Ghost would choose it. Just another little thing about him there to learn.

Ghost is sitting with his back to the wall at a table in the corner. The café is dead and he sticks out like a sore thumb. The workers behind the counters try not to stare at the big guy with the skull mask, but ultimately fail. The one working the register leaps into the air as Soap steps through, the bell clanging loudly. One timid girl steps forward to

help him but backs off when he points towards Ghost.

His eyes are on Soap the entire time. He feels them burrowing, digging a spot where Ghost can fit comfortably for a few hours then vacate – leaving Soap hollow and miserable.

"Didn't figure you for the cozy café type," He slumps down in the chair across from him.

Ghost holds up a paper cup, "I like the tea here."

"Fucking Brits."

Ghost sets the cup down. His eye twitches in a smirk.

"Bet this place doesn't see a lot of business. Probably makes it easier to show your face."

"Just the good parts."

"I can think of better." He finds himself saying before his filter kicks in. Have to redirect. Why was he here in the first place?

"You called." He says.

"You came." Ghost leans back in his chair, crossing his arms across his very large chest. Today he'd chosen a black long-sleeve with a short-sleeve button up over it to contain it all. The button up has a picture of a cartoon pig on it with the name of a butcher's shop on it. Interesting choice.

"Well, I'm what my nan would call a dunderheid."

"Your nan seems smart."

"Away n' bile yer heid." Soap chuckles.

Ghost looks down at his lap, "About the other night..."

"We had sex," Soap says as calmly as he can with his heart doing somersaults behind his sternum, "Happens." If he said it as matter of fact as possible, maybe it would help Ghost with whatever blockage had occurred between them even though the casual nature of it was entirely fabricated. That night, it didn't just happen. It had been the start of something that neither seemed keen on ending. That's what Soap hoped, at least.

"Not to me."

"I figured." Ghost's eyes snap to him. "That sounded bad. I meant because it happened and you filed it under 'complicated'." Soap stumbles, trying to backtrack. In the second it took the words to travel from his brain to his mouth, he hadn't thought about how it actually sounded. "It was good," he adds.

"Because it is complicated. For me." His voice is steady but he closes his eyes, like he's reconsidering what he's about to say.

"The mask that much of a turn off?" He jokes, trying to keep him engaged and take some of the pressure off.

"Obviously not, Johnny."

Soap's cheeks heat up dangerously. If he'd had a drink in front of him, he'd have choked on it. "Good point."

"Never really had interest in it, is all. Pissed my dad off." He grimaces.

"Bet you broke a lot of girls' hearts then." Soap smiles.

"Have to ask them. But-"

"It's one of those things."

"If you keep interrupting me Sergeant, I'm leaving you to foot the bill."

"Noted." Soap holds his hands up.

"But yes, it's one of those things. Since that night, I've been thinking about how good that night was. I'm not used to that."

Ghost's arms hang heavily at his side, making him look dead. "I'm not used to feeling good about myself, physically," He swallows, leaning forward and shifting his arms to rest on the table. He clutches a steaming paper cup, "but, the way you speak to me and touch me, makes me feel good. Like this body has worth. I haven't felt like that in a while."

Soap was insecure sometimes about his body – too tall for some people, too short for others. He questioned the mohawk and sometimes didn't like how heavy his brows were. But he got the idea that that wasn't what Ghost meant. His eyes are filled with a glittering longing that tugs at Soap's heart. His throat tightens, both from hurt at hearing Ghost's pain, and pride for having eased it, even just a little

bit.

"I never cared for sex," He clarifies, "but I didn't hate myself like that until..." He looks up into the lights. They pick out flecks of orange in his eyes. He blinks away the spots that must be dancing in those eyes. "I wish I had the strength to tell you in person why that is, but I don't. I don't have that kind of power in me. But I can show you."

"Show me?"

Ghost pulls his mask up and downs his tea. He stands, not waiting for Soap to follow before dropping some money on the counter and stepping outside. Soap stumbles out of his chair, not wanting to miss a thing.

Ghost's waiting right outside, hands shoved in his pants pocket.

"Where are we going?"

"My flat."

"Your flat?"

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank you all for the comments because they light up my day. I save all of them as motivation whenever I get writer's block. This happened because of you guys!

i looked weak, my eyes they gave it all away

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song Over My Head by Furslide

Reread the tags. I heavily reference Modern Warfare 2: Ghost in this chapter. There is nothing explicit, but I want ya'll to be prepared.

And yes, another early chapter. I might just keep releasing them on Thursday if I have the time.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ghost begins walking away, the opposite direction from the Tube station Soap had taken to get there. A few turns later, Ghost is buzzing them into a brown-brick building with dirty windows. It's too large to be a townhouse, but seems small for a multi-residence building.

After two flights of stairs, Soap looks down the length of a dark hallway. It's not like there weren't any lights, there were, they were just extremely dim. They lit enough of the space to be functional but that's where their uses end. The doors lining the walls are dark but full of personality. One has a dry erase board with a marker hanging off it. Written on it are names of, presumably, neighbors, and when their names are unknown – there are nicknames and flat numbers. Whoever wrote them had written things like "good morning" and "have a good day" usually followed by a heart or star. One, written in a tiny corner, reads, "Welcome Back" with a drawing of a skull.

Other doors are harder to see but have similar embellishments like happy slogans on signs and magnets. Many of them relate to Halloween. The only one that doesn't fit this pattern is Ghost's. On it is only a placard with his flat number on it.

Ghost's keys jingle as he unlocks both the actual door and a deadbolt. It's such a mundane and domestic action and not one Soap thought he might ever see even after imagining what his home would be like.

Ghost doesn't turn on the overhead lights, instead, opting for a lamp on a table.

His flat is small. The living room itself is only a few feet across with the kitchen tucked away in a corner. Despite the small size, it's packed

with furniture, all of it well-loved. There's a table shoved up against the wall, littered with paper, canvases, dirty cups, paint, and charcoal. Next to it is a bookshelf stuffed with books, only some of whose titles are visible. *Working With Your Past. Your Face Reflected. Not Your Trauma.* Self-Help books. Their spines are cracked, but only towards the front, like Ghost hadn't finished reading them.

He had no TV, instead just a chair, coffee table, and couch took up the rest of the living space. A single brown rug with spots worn in it protects the already scratched wood floor.

"Get yourself a drink. Cups in the cupboard on the right." Ghost points towards the kitchen and walks off to a room to the left.

Soap's legs lock in place. He's here. He's really here, in Ghost's flat. It's both nothing like he expected and everything he had. Expected – dark colours, minimal light. Unexpected – the cluttered tables and self-help books.

He navigates the tight space to the table, almost tripping on a blanket that had fallen from the couch. There is another blanket, a regular pillow, and a grey-green body pillow shoved onto it. The couch cushions are just as worn as the carpet. Soap puts the blanket back, draping it over the arm. The coffee table has an empty cup on it and some prescription bottles. There's even a laptop, although the casing is scratched to hell. There are small tools littered around it as well as what looks like an external harddrive.

With so much stuff around the place, Soap can't help but feel like he is snooping. He's not digging into any of it, but he's still in Ghost's home. Everything left on the surface is a part of Simon that he hadn't known until now. He knows that Ghost would have cleaned up if he hadn't wanted him seeing it, but it's still wrong. And yet, he can't help himself.

Soap returns his focus to the table in the back. It's such a cluttered mess, the items on it threatening to fall off with a single touch. How did he find anything in it? Each and every paper has dark paint splashed on it in every shade between black and white. Some had smears of charcoal instead. The dirtied cups contain drying paint water and despite all this, there are no paintbrushes.

It had been obscured by the couch, but leaning up against the table is a larger canvas, about as wide as the couch and about knee height. It's covered in thick smears of paint as well. Each streak so thick that they

pop off the page. There are no discernible shapes or images, just smears, smudges, and blobs. Soap is careful not to disturb any of it.

Interesting. Ghost didn't seem like the abstract art kind of person. Or a painter in general.

Though he guesses that's the exact reason he'd brought him here, get it out all in one go, like ripping off a band-aid. For weeks he had been ignoring Soap. This was his way of opening up, letting Soap move through his life in his own time without feeling judged.

He moves to the bookshelf. Almost every book on it looks untouched or just barely opened. Some have bookmarks sticking out, only a few pages in. Everywhere Soap looks, he finds more self-help books about trauma and art therapy. Some are memoirs with titles that depicted recovering addicts, veterans, and others he couldn't discern from the title alone. He picks up one, scanning the description on the back. The author tells the story of their mother's fight with addiction and how it affected their family. Some of the more read through books appeared to be fiction of some sort. The spine of one in particular is completely gone, held together by glue and a few paper scraps. Soap opens this one carefully, glancing at the title page. In a curly, albeit shaky, handwriting is a small message reading:

We're always thinking about you! Love Mom.

With a little heart in place of a period. It's a collection of short stories. Soap places it back in its exact spot.

The rest are all pretty nondescript – plain covers and stickers showing they'd been bought second hand. As he looks through the shelf, he notices there are no photos anywhere, not even stock images. The table gave the impression Ghost did a lot of painting but none of them are displayed, just buried under more paintings. Like abandoned journals in a cardboard box.

Ghost comes back a minute later and tosses a manilla folder onto the coffee table. It's swollen with papers all tucked inside and tied together with a thick string. The front has thick streaks of black marker striking out the words underneath.

"What's that?" Soap's voice sounds loud in the small room.

"My file."

"I've seen your file." He remembers it clearly. Price had sent it to him

before Soap and Ghost first met on that tarmac in Al Mazrah. How little any of them knew how that moment would change their lives.

The folder Price had given him was startlingly thin and had a blank image clipped to the front. *Simon "Ghost" Riley* had been scrawled on it. Inside were mission briefs and reports going back only a few years. Almost everything had been classified or left blank. It gave the impression of someone well versed in covert operations. He admired it. Admittedly, that influenced the informal way he'd greeted, for all intents and purposes, his superior officer.

"You've seen my new one. It was one of my conditions of coming back." He turns away, "Just read it." His voice has a strange neutrality to it, a detachment to the folder in front of him. If Soap hadn't known better, he would think it was just another mission brief, not something Ghost kept hidden away in his flat. Though his voice is that of a professional, his eyes tell a different story. Even with the black greasepaint, Soap can see the bags underneath – the skin swollen and puffy. He's so tired, so *defeated*, by whatever is in that folder. Soap almost hugs him right there. But he's smart enough to know that would be a mistake. This isn't baby steps for Simon, this is huge and if it fails, he'd end up worse than when he started. This is what he'd been dreading telling him. The prospect of knowing Ghost's life thrills him in some way – a sort of pride of being allowed in. But also a dread.

Ghost nabs the prescription bottles off the table as well as the empty cup before busying himself in the kitchen.

Soap waits until he hears the sink running to settle on the couch with the folder in front of him. A brick is probably a better descriptor given how thick and heavy it is. The folded edge is so worn in places that it had turned white and ripped, letting the pages within poke through. The entire thing is fragile, like a bomb.

He doesn't notice the sink has been turned off until the chair across from him squeaks. Ghost sits there, leaning back. Not in a relaxed way by any means, but to show Soap he has space. Or maybe to distance himself from the folder and quite literally, his past.

Soap gently unties the string, half-expecting the entire thing to explode as soon as he touches it. Instead it falls limply to the table like the simple object it is. He's holding his breath as he opens the folder as if breathing on it would destroy everything within.

Pinned to the front is a photo of Simon in a private's uniform. He's younger, with longer hair, but no less of a serious demeanor. He doesn't smile and his shoulders are perfectly aligned. Another detail strikes him about the photo – his nose is straight, untouched by whatever had broken it and created the scar. The scar on his lip is there though, already a little pink line. He's so young, by Soap's best estimate, 18 or so. The picture is so clear that Soap can see him standing in lineup, standing taller than those around him. There's a brightness in his eyes, a mischievously hopeful look, like this was the start of a joke only him and the universe were in on.

The first few documents are ones Soap recognizes well – applications, intake forms, and recommendations. After that is a basic personnel sheet. Soap had seen Simon's before, only most had been redacted or just plain blank. This one is filled with typeface and handwritten addendums in different handwritings and ink colours. His name, his age of enlistment, and personal details were typed in, solid and unchanging. There are only four years between them. Soap hadn't really thought about Ghost's age. It hadn't mattered to either of them.

Most of the notes had been made regarding emergency contacts and next of kin. The original was a single phone number listed as belonging to his mother. Later entries add Tommy and Beth Riley as well. Their relationship to the soldier is noted next to them – brother and sister-in-law respectively. No father is noted.

He flips forward a few pages reading notes about performance and advancement records. There's a ruthless efficiency noted within them especially in the areas of sabotage and ambush. The most interesting thing is a notice for family leave that left a three year gap in his record. Soap made a note to ask him about that at some point, if he ever got the chance. Amazing that it was approved to begin with given the length. There's no hints in his record as to why he took the leave. There are a few notes in his disciplinary records of near misses where he'd gotten into fights with older soldiers.

The next page is a mission brief immediately followed by a transfer request, signed by Major Vernon with the U.S. Special Forces. Soap is careful holding the report. It bears seals from the U.S. Special Forces and British SAS. A squad of men had been sent to either arrest or eliminate drug cartel leader, Manuel Roba. The rest is all familiar territory. Soap reads through locations and tactics that were practically one for one the things they did now. Six names were signed to the assignment, U.S. Special Forces' Vernon, Sparks, Washington, Cumberland, and Sykes. The only British SAS agent was one Sergeant

Simon Riley. Stapled to it are updated reports about their progress, only about two days worth before the report suddenly ends.

It's followed by a M.I.A. report. Soap flips back to the beginning and notices something that should have been obvious. He just was too focused on Ghost having a family he'd never spoken about to notice. Under the soldier's status are various stamps and slash marks – active duty, on leave, M.I.A, deceased, then on leave again. The bright red ink mars the already muddled page.

The M.I.A report listed the same names, saying the squad had reported the accidental death of Sykes three days before radio silence. The rest failed to report after the planned siege of Manuel Roba's compound.

Another sheet is clipped to the initial report. It's scant in details, just like everything else regarding this mission.

Washington and Sparks returned home after escaping captivity. When questioned, the two confirmed that Vernon and Cumberland were K.I.A. Riley was presumed K.I.A.

The date was nine months after the initial report.

That's when Soap came across the next photo. Or set of photos, more accurately. They have a case number on them, and *John Doe* typed on a label marking them as belonging to Texas State Troopers. It's dated a few days after the updated M.I.A report. They showed an unconscious Simon in a hospital bed – bruised, bloodied, dehydrated and on full display. His nose was crooked now and you can see the unset break in the photos. Soap had assumed that the scar across his nose had to have come from ordinance of some kind with how long it was, but the pictures make it clear that its creation had been a much longer and more painful process. The now pink scar across his nose was once a violent streak of black-red, deep and fresh, showing up particularly strong amongst all the purples, yellows, and reds of new and old bruises. Each sickening colour is bright against his pale and sun burnt skin. Even his scraggly beard couldn't hide them. Seeing Simon in the hospital after their recent OP had been difficult to say the least. The fever that left him shaking, sweating, and pale was entirely Soap's fault because he'd been too frazzled to do something actually useful. These photos were worse than that. Soap played football in secondary school, he knew how so many bruises built up on each other hurt. The muscles became heavy and burned hot while the rest of you grew cold. His stomach seizes looking at the first photo. He skips the rest for his own sanity. And to give Simon the

privacy the State Troopers hadn't.

Similar to the previous report, there's an added note:

Texas State Troopers sent out photos of an unidentified male to various law enforcement agencies and governments. The U.S. Special Forces forwarded them to SAS and the subject was identified as Sergeant Simon Riley. Currently awaiting transfer back to Credenhill.

His file includes a full police and medical report as well as an SAS request for patient transfer. These few reports make up the bulk of the file and Soap isn't sure whether he has the stomach to read them. He looks up at Ghost, looking for any change in his body language or posture. His eyes are focused on the photos. He studies them, as if they were new or belonging to someone else. Soap wishes he could muster the same detachment looking at them. He's arguably seen (and done) much worse in his line of work, but in the heat of the moment, you couldn't let it affect you. This wasn't the field. He's sitting in his friend's flat, digging through the dark secrets of his past. There was nothing he could do but let it affect him deeply.

The police report is short, especially compared to the following medical reports. The responding officer found a then unidentified male semi-conscious near the US-Mexico border. He was taken to a nearby hospital where two days later he was identified. The file ends with a note saying British Special Air Services would be taking over jurisdiction.

Soap only skims the medical report supplied by the hospital as well as the rest supplied by a hospital in London. If the pictures had been any indication, it was going to be bad. Broken bones that had healed improperly needed resetting, extreme dehydration and starvation had been treated along with burns both electrical and natural – these had been treated in Texas. He'd been transferred shortly after he regained consciousness. In London, a drug test as well as and STI/STD screening had been done before Simon had been sent home to be with his mother and brother. Under the infectious disease screening is a typed note - *Screening done at request of patient.*

Soap's heart stops. *Oh.*

He focuses on the prescription requests instead – recommendations for antibiotics, and pain management followed by a referral to a military psychiatrist. The next few pages are a back and forth between requests to return to service by both Ghost and a Major Fairbanks, all blocked

by psychiatrist recommendations. These, he also didn't read though he does see that the second request had a report regarding the prescription of antidepressants. The trend holds. Sadly, these back and forths were all too common in personnel files. His file almost looked the same after he punched an officer. Definitely after getting stranded in Urzikstan for a short time. Ghost's spanned four months. It's capped off with another closed police report, this time from a police department just outside of London. More photos are tacked onto that one as well, but he couldn't stand to look at any more, especially after reading the case's brief rundown – four shot to death on Christmas eve. Two other reports were added, dated hours later. The first victim was an older man found shot to death in the cancer ward of a hospital. Soap's eyes catch the victim's last name seconds before he turns the page. His father. So he had been alive when Ghost enlisted. The second details the murder of a military psychiatrist. He recognises her name as the same one Ghost had been referred to. All had been linked to a single suspect. Soap didn't need to look at the attached photo to know who it was.

Afterwards is a military investigation report with even more pictures, investigating the deaths of Major Fairbanks and Marcus Washington. The latter had been found dead in his bunk at base and Kevin Sparks had been reported missing. Surveillance caught a masked intruder believed to be Ghost. That specific report ended with the confirmed death of Simon Riley.

The Riley Residence had fully burned by the time local emergency services were able to tame the fire. Inside, the body of a male. Identified as Riley through dog tags. Likely Suicide. Sparks still missing.

Soap flips to the final report, unsure if he even wants to read it. His hand hovers over the stapled document. On the cover was a stamp belonging to the Mexican Military and British SAS.

Ghost rises from his chair and settles next to Soap, taking the file gently. His eyes never leave it. After tossing the rest on the coffee table, he begins to read it.

"Unidentified male arrested after being seen covered in blood wearing a skull mask. When questioned, the suspect surrendered before going silent for the rest of the interview. Local authorities later investigated and found twenty deceased at a compound, including that of drug lord, Manuel Roba. Suspect was jailed awaiting further decision."

He pulls a mugshot out. The mask had been pulled off for it, but it

didn't mean it made him look anything less like death itself. The harsh overhead lighting cast deep shadows that highlighted every bone in his face. His dark, dead eyes stared over the camera instead of into it. Drying blood had splashed across his face. Soap could see the clear outline where the mask had been.

"Transfer to British SAS under custody of Captain John Price - 2nd January 2018."

He sets it down as if it were made of glass.

"That Simon is dead. *His* life ended with his family. I am not him." Emotion creeps into his voice.

He stands, unsteady on his feet. Soap's brain had stopped thinking, overloaded by just how much it was.

Ghost digs around one of his cabinets, doing his best to hide behind the wooden door.

"Do you really believe that?" Soap asks.

He slams an unopened bottle of bourbon on the counter and pulls the cup from earlier out of the sink. His palms are flat against the counter top.

"Do you?" Soap asks again, walking around the couch to stop at the edge of the kitchen. The overhead light brushes the tips of his shoes. Ghost is lit from above, only his head exists outside of shadow. He's a dark streak against the light.

"I have to. Because every time I'm with you, I'm reminded I'm a person. I'm that person. The way that I want you...it's torture and it's beautiful, Johnny. But *that*," Ghost hesitates, hand held slightly out towards Soap. He sways, as if he needs him for stability. He clenches his fist,

"That person was *happy*. For the first time in months, I didn't feel like a living corpse and it was ripped away from me. Shutting it away meant I didn't have to feel their loss. I didn't have to mourn them. But when I'm with you, I am happy again. I'm that person and I have to feel them all over again." His voice breaks.

The low light of the kitchen highlights the tears welling in his eyes, "I didn't fight hard enough to keep them safe. I didn't fight at all. So I don't deserve the happiness that you seem to give away in abundance

and it kills me because it's all I want. I want Ghost who has no past and history and I also want Simon because he at least had hope for a future. I can't have both."

"What you think those pages reflect doesn't make you less deserving of happiness. The you I saw in those pages..." He struggles to find the words because they are none that can bring comfort to a situation like this.

"The Simon you saw," He pushes the bourbon away and fills the cup with water again, "Thought that enlistment would save him from his father. Thought that his nephew's first Christmas with his uncle back would *fix* whatever had broken in Mexico." He stares at the cup, swirling the water around inside of it.

Soap stares at the floor. "I saw a hard worker. I saw a man who had people who cared about him. I saw..." the words threaten to leave him again. If he didn't say them now, they'd be lost forever.

"I saw *you*. I saw what Price sees when he looks at you. A person. A *friend*."

He just lets the words continue to pour forth.

"If that had been anyone else's file, would you want them to isolate themselves? To give up every part of their life – good and bad? What if it was Gaz? Or Price?" *What if it was me?*

"Their lives are their own." He responds gruffly.

"I don't believe you'd give up that easily," He takes a single step into the kitchen, past the invisible boundary line, "No. You'd tell bad jokes no matter how much it made them groan. You'd talk about how cold and dark your heart was, all while being the brightest fucking lighthouse guiding them home. You'd make fun of their drink choices. You'd do *everything* to make them remember they are *alive*." He stops just a foot away from Ghost.

"*You* are alive, Simon. And you are worth so much more than what you believe."

"I didn't show you all that for a pep talk."

"But you showed me. Would you still have those things if you truly believed that the man in those pages had died?"

Soap chews the inside of his cheek, "You think being Ghost protects you from Simon's feelings but it doesn't. It's clear as day. The name is just a shiny new coat of paint and all it's doing is depriving you of love. It's not keeping the trauma at arm's length."

Soap rests his hand on Simon's arm, gently nudging him so he has to look at him.

He closes his eyes.

"You don't have to be what was in those pages. But keeping them buried in a bedroom you can't bring yourself to sleep in, is not letting the memory rest, it's suffocating it in the hope you don't have to deal with it. And it's suffocating you, too."

Simon doesn't speak until he opens his eyes, "I don't know how to stop." His voice is barely a whisper and his breath settles on Soap's face.

Soap swallows, "I don't know either. But I'll stay with you until we do."

Simon inhales deeply, holding the breath for a moment, before letting it all out. He lifts his hand, and Soap stays in place, unsure of what to do now. Simon slowly pulls his mask off. His hand thumps against his thigh, letting the mask hang limply in his hand. Then, he leans over, placing his head in the crook of Soap's neck. His head is turned away.

"I told you I didn't want you to be my therapist."

"I'm not. Just reminding you you've got people in your corner. Teammates."

Soap itches to hold onto him and never let him go. But this moment was about freedom - something Simon struggled to find. Freedom from his past, freedom from himself. This needed to be all him. Soap does lean into him though, better supporting both of them.

"I want to thank you." Soap murmurs, finally allowing himself to rub Simon's hair. It's partially matted with sweat, lying flat against his head.

"For what?"

Soap thinks back to the file. Specifically that single infectious disease panel.

"For letting me touch you," He whispers, afraid the world might hear. He's even afraid that Simon might hear him, regretting the words as they come out. Soap moves to stop petting Simon's head. But his hands stop Soap before he can, gripping onto his bicep with cold strong fingers.

"Don't think about it too hard, Johnny. Please?"

And that word, that *single* word, is such a simple one. In all the time he'd known Simon, he'd never heard him say it. It often came implied with certain requests. Between them, it simply didn't need to be said. Hearing it now, quiet and hushed against his neck, sent Soap's stomach into knots.

Simon exhales warmly against Soap's skin.

Then Soap finds himself saying something else he wishes he hadn't, "I can leave if you need some space."

He couldn't imagine living through any of that. He'd skimmed so much, only touching the surface of Ghost's life. Was human contact better or isolation? They both seem like equally bad options.

"No." There's no room for debate in Simon's tone. Soap was staying whether he liked it or not.

Good thing he loved it.

They don't do a lot of talking for the next few hours. They raid his kitchen for food of some kind and eat in silence on the floor, back against the cold hard cabinets. Simon keeps his eyes on his yogurt but Soap keeps flicking his eyes up at him, every bit of this day feeling unreal. He considers it a gift.

The wrapping is ugly, marred with Soap's own anxieties and Simon's past, but the inside is something warm, giving comfort to something nestled deep within his chest.

"Were you lying to Gaz?" Simon asks, looking up at Soap through his eyelashes.

"What do you mean?" Soap picks at the crumbs in his crisps bag.

"Did you really not have any pets growing up?"

"I didn't. Wanted one, though."

"So you like animals?" He stirs his yogurt absent-mindedly, like he'd forgotten he was eating.

"If I say yes, are you going to make another 'half a dog' joke?"

Simon remains silent, but his eyes glint in a way that reminds Soap of the photo clipped to the front of his file.

They return to their respective meals. Though Soap stretches his leg out towards Simon. He looks up at the motion, and almost out of reflex, stretches his leg out as well. The soles of their boots touch and stay there. Simon studies them for a moment until Soap taps his foot, then it's back to eating, as if nothing had changed and how beautiful is that?

Simon sets the empty container on the ground next to him. The heavy weight of the spoon knocks it over.

"You haven't been sleeping." He says it as a fact, hands sitting in his lap and his eyes on Soap's.

He chews thoughtfully, preferring not to answer and pursue this line of questioning. Couldn't they just enjoy the moment together?

"You have bruises under your eyes. Nightmares." Again, another fact.

Soap sets the bag down between his thighs so the remaining crisps don't fall out. He'd eaten half the bag already and each individual crisp threatens to come back up in a burning bile – muted, but present. He wishes he could blame the vinegar contained within them for his ills. Instead he's plagued by the dreams he'd only been able to ward off using medication.

"Sharing is caring." Simon says, taking on that same tone he had in Las Almas – a mix of sarcasm, sincerity, and stoic irritation.

Soap looks around at the flat, the paintings, the self-help books, the computer parts, the prescriptions, the booze, then finally back at Simon.

"Yes." His voice is flatter than he expected it to be.

Simon nods.

"What about?"

"You. Always you. Yours?" Soap stabs at him in a moment of

defensiveness.

Simon doesn't take the bait.

"Do you have someone you talk to?"

"No. But I have something, just like you do. You worried about me, L.t.?"

Soap expects a sarcastic answer, a tongue in cheek reference to Las Almas. Everything went back to Las Almas.

"Naturally. I like having all of you alive."

"That's something we can both agree on then," Soap lifts the crisp back up in toast. Simon grabs the discarded spoon. It's a bit of a stretch, but they tap them together. Simon watches him finish eating, getting crumbs and salt all down his front. It's sexy, that's for sure.

Simon rolls his shoulders, something popping very loudly in his back. Soap suppresses a chuckle. It's easy to forget on the field the abuse they go through and the toll it takes on the body. Simon stretches out, another pop following. He lifts his arms above his head, linking his fingers. His shirt hikes up half an inch to show off the tiniest bit of skin. It's not until he feels Simon's eyes on him that he realizes he's staring. Here he was so effortlessly beautiful and Soap is wiping drool and salt from his chin. This, Simon watches, but with probably much less awe.

Soap blushes and brushes crumbs off his shirt and onto Simon's paint-stained floor, breaking his starry-eyed mooning as well as desperately trying to control the heat that creeps into his skin. So desperate that he doesn't notice Simon move. He isn't even aware of him until he's kneeling in front of Soap, knees on the sides of his legs. A few more inches and he'd be in Soap's lap.

"Kitchen's small." He explains. The tone he uses would convince any man that he was telling the truth as if there isn't a good couple feet now empty behind him.

Soap gulps, "Yes it is." The bile and nervousness fades away, replaced by something not too different in Soap's experience. Which feels entirely wrong given everything he's learned today and the previous topic of conversation. *God, he's an asshole.*

"Your ears are burning." Simon takes the empty crisp bag and crumples it, tossing it on the counter above them.

Soap tries to school his emotions. Simon had stated in various different ways that his sex drive worked differently than Soap's, but he also still hadn't moved from his pseudo-straddling position that wasn't doing Soap's critical thinking any favors. Simon looks down at him with only his eyes, studying his face and the blush creeping its way up his neck. The angle gives Soap a good view of his sharp jawline and the light stubble that travels down. It still amazes him how blond the hair on Simon's body was compared to the hair on his head. It's a shade or two darker, too brown to ever be called blond but still very light. He should have looked like a dunce, but the combination is intriguing in many different ways. He wants to run his hands over Simon's thighs and Simon's well...everything.

But he still can't shake the heaviness of everything he's learned. The two desires combat each other in a cruel way, neither of them gaining any ground. If only Simon could make a fucking move. Make the choice for him. But he doesn't and Soap's heart begins to beat with anxiety and excitement, a dangerous combo that has him switching between fun happy thoughts and a deep self-loathing.

Simon's eyes search his face and that's when it clicks for Soap.

He's feeling the exact same way.

His fingers twitch at his sides and his breathing is slow and deep, like that of a sniper about to take their shot.

"You sure you want to do this, L.t.?"

Simon leans back, the look on his face hardening, "Questioning my decision-making?"

"I'm worr-"

"Stop. Don't treat me like I'm fragile, Soap."

"I know you're not." He brushes his thumb across the scar on Simon's cheek.

"Then prove it."

"If you have something you want to ask, L.t., just ask." Soap can't help the begging note that teases at the edge of his voice. He leans forward, just a bit.

Simon sets his jaw, the muscles in his face flexing with the strain. But

then he crawls forwards a bit to settle in Soap's lap. His weight is comforting and warm. The only problem is that Soap's heart may give out, looking up at an angel that surely must have been painted by Michelangelo himself.

Soap closes his eyes as Simon brushes his hands across his neck, his knuckles kissing his jaw before finally holding his head in both of his cool hands. Under his touch, his head felt heavy, forcing him to lean into it. He brings his hands to rest on Simon's elbows, steadying his already steady and sure hands. But then Simon's hands slide down to Soap's shoulders, moving down his arms, raising goosebumps through the sleeves of his jacket before playing with the hem of his shirt.

"Alright if I go ahead?" He asks, hooking his thumbs underneath his shirt and intensifying the anticipating shivers racking his poor needing body. He can't help but press up into it.

Simon doesn't continue, "Yes or No, Soap." His tone isn't teasing.

"Yes."

A smile, small but genuine, settles on his face before he's sharing it with Soap in the form of his lips on his. Simon's skin always has a clammy quality to it, not cold, but a misty coolness instead. It pairs well with Soap's warm skin, always extra heated by his touch.

Soap finally allows himself to move his hands to Simon's hips, pressing him deeper into Soap's lap. In response, Simon grabs onto the back of Soap's neck, holding his head in place as he deepens the kiss, his teeth scraping against Soap's desperate lips. The smallest of moans escape his lips straight into Simon's waiting mouth.

Any questions he may have had regarding whether Simon was really willing to do this go away as he drags a heavy hand down Soap's front. His lips twitch mischievously upwards as Soap squirms under him

"Sit still, sergeant." The words rumble through Soap, the two still connected by their lips. The command settles at the base of his spine in a delicious knot, he can't help but buck upwards.

"Are you really going to sit here and taunt me?" He growls, pressing his thumbs into the fat around Simon's hips. He's careful to keep his fingers between Simon's sweats and boxers, not wanting to go any further without his explicit say-so.

“Maybe I will. Maybe I’ll...” He starts to get up, leaving Soap’s lap empty and cold.

“No, please?” Soap holds onto his forearms, begging.

Simon fucking smirks at him and let’s Soap pull him back down to his aching body.

“You’re pathetic, Soap.”

“Yes, I’m pathetic,” He pulls Simon back into a deep kiss, not bothering to stop before uttering his next few words, “So come on.”

Simon slides his hands around to Soap’s back, grabbing the hem of his shirt. He’s painfully slow pulling it off and over Soap’s head, planting another quick kiss before finally pulling it over Soap’s already flushed face. How did Simon do it? How is he not breathless yet? Soap grabs onto the front of that stupid butcher shop shirt and tugs him closer, begging him to run his mouth over his neck and shoulders. They’re cold without him, so naked and lonely.

Simon’s hands return to his back, dancing his fingers across the bumps of Soap’s spine, all with his face buried in his neck, kissing and sucking small red circles on the waiting skin. Soap arches into it, pressing his bare chest to Simon’s, the buttons leaving imprints. It would be too much work to unbutton each and every one. It could stay on for now. So Soap moves his hands to the front of Simon’s pants, once again waiting for permission to move forward. He tugs at the strings to get his attention. Simon moves one of his hands to guide Soap’s, moving his itching fingers past the waistband of both pants and boxers. Unlike his hands, the skin beneath his clothes is warm, so beautifully warm and alive. Simon continues to massage circles into the small of Soap’s back with one hand, and holds Soap’s wrist with the other.

Soap’s heart races dangerously fast, almost unpleasantly so. But it’s all worth it when Simon’s hand leaves his back and drops to the small space between them.

Soap holds Simon’s chin, pushing his head back just to kiss his throat, feeling his own excited heartbeat. He exhales, bracing himself on the cabinet behind Soap and tilting his head to allow Soap more access to his quickly flushing skin, red and warm and perfect.

Simon’s gasps a question that Soap barely hears before he’s giving him a breathless ‘yes’. He finally, *finally*, unbuttons Soap’s jeans. He

shouldn't have worn them. They're too restrictive, too much of a barrier between the two of them. Even the thin cotton of his briefs were in the way. Simon takes his sweet fucking time pulling the zipper down, not speeding up even as Soap bites at him. Soap pulls down on Simon's offending sweats, freeing more of his delicious stomach and hips for Soap's eyes to feast upon. Simon moves his hand to the waistband of Soap's boxers, pulling them down enough to expose more of the dark hair that trails down from his chest. He stops short of fully exposing Soap to the cold air of the kitchen. Soap barely chokes out a plea for permission to finally do something besides make out with each other's skin.

And Simon says, "Yes," breath hot against Soap's cheek, the words kissing his ears. That is the last identifiable word either of them say for a while.

Simon lets Soap borrow some sweatpants to replace the ones that now needed to be washed. Now they're tangled together on Simon's too small couch, heads at opposite ends. Simon clutches his body pillow, face buried in it, ready to go to bed. Soap has no idea what time it is, only knows it's dark out. He could check his phone, but that requires detangling the two of them and the thought of doing that is unbearable.

Soap readjusts the pillow behind his head.

"L.t.?"

Simon mumbles into his pillow.

"I have another question. And feel free to tell me to fuck off."

No more mumbling comes his way. He takes that as a signal to go ahead.

"You said you didn't 'care for sex.' What does that mean exactly?"

"What are you talking about, Johnny?" Simon covers his eyes with his arm, sleep tugging at his words.

"I mean, as a concept? An action?"

"Exactly what it sounds like. It's not that hard of a concept to grasp."

Soap shifts a bit so he can see Simon better, "You said you don't care for it and yet you like it when we do it."

"Because it's you," he snaps, "Fucking hell. Is that what you want to hear?"

Soap shuts up.

"When everyone and their cousin in my secondary were shacking up, I wasn't. I didn't look at anybody and get the appeal of sex with any of them. With you it's different."

Different. Different is good. Soap is content to leave the conversation there.

But Simon turns towards Soap, a single eye peeking at him. "Mainly because I want to make you feel good because it makes me feel good."

"So..."

He hides his face again, "You're not the first, Soap. Sorry to burst your bubble."

"...Right."

Soap squirms some more, more questions on the tip of his tongue.

"A footballer I went to school with."

Soap felt like he should share as well and make this less of an interrogation, "A girl from a coffee shop. She went to a different school but we saw each other at parties."

Simon grunts.

He opens his mouth to make more conversation until Simon kicks him in the ribs, "Go to sleep, Soap or go home."

"Yes, sir." It takes some effort to unbury the blanket from both their large and heavy frames and surprisingly more to cover them both in it. That, he is less successful in doing and gives up once it's covering at least their legs.

Soap sleeps without incident. Really only knowing he had slept because the room is different when he opens his eyes. There's more light in it, courtesy of weak morning sunlight coming in through one of the living room windows. The curtains hadn't been open when he arrived yesterday, but now it looked as if Ghost had decided to let some light in. Even then, they still weren't open more than an inch. It looks different with natural lighting – not so cramped.

Ghost himself is no longer on the couch, the blanket shared between them is now fully covering Soap. He pulls it closer to his nose, breathing in the scent of bargain detergent and something uniquely Ghost – gun oil and tea. There's a small clamor in the kitchen, glass scraping against tile and someone sitting down.

Ghost is sitting on the kitchen floor, his back towards the window. In front of him is a large canvas. Paint cans and tubes litter the floor. The sleeves of his jacket are rolled up and paints coat his hands up to his elbows. He's not wearing his mask and his hair is mussed, with paint splotches in it. The canvas in front of him is half filled with dripping paint that pools onto the floor. Much like the one Soap had seen yesterday, it's formless blobs. Since this was unfinished, you could see drying fingerprints on it.

"What time is it?" Soap croaks.

"08:00." He says gruffly, then drags his thumb across the canvas, leaving a vertical streak of white in the darkness.

"How long you been working on that?" Soap leans against the back of the couch, resting his head on crossed arms.

"Don't know." With his index finger, he blends some of the white into the black, blurring the edges. It gives the single line a glowing effect.

Soap stretches out and catches the personnel file still spread out on the table, untouched since the day before. Amazing how so much of someone's life had been held in it. So much of what made Simon tick could be summed up a few sentences.

He climbs over the back of the couch, wanting to be close to him again. He settles down next to him just as he makes another white line. The change in seat gives him a better perspective of the painting.

The entire back had been painted in a glossy black. The sunlight catches the ridges that formed where the paint is thicker. The texture seemed to be a pattern in Simon's work. Swirls would coalesce into pristine fingerprints. In the center of the painting are the two streaks of white. The thick paint drips downwards towards the floor. Ghost wipes it to the side, mixing it with the black into a dark grey.

Soap had never understood abstract art. But when you've been given an inside look into the artist's life, when you knew them and loved them, you could see the meaning. You knew it like you had made it yourself. The glowing white streaks in the darkness that faded into

grey like shadows, they were people – one shorter than the other, one brighter than the other. Ghost wipes his hands onto his pants, staining them black.

"How long have you been painting?" Soap asks.

Simon exhales, standing. He grabs the painting and slides it carefully onto the counter. There's paint all over the floor, leaving a messy outline where the painting had been. Soap wipes it. Some of it smears on the floor, while others remain as perfect specks. Much older paint covers the floor.

"A while." He says as he steps over Soap back towards his work table. He grabs another stark white canvas, leaving black fingerprints. He pauses, "When I came back from Mexico, I had a therapist who suggested I try to do something artistic. If I didn't want to verbalize my feelings, I should show them in a different way." Simon cringes as he speaks, like the words themselves are physically painful. He sits back down next to Soap with a grunt.

"Guess it stuck." He says, setting the small canvas onto the floor.

"I lived with my mother and together we would watch my nephew. I'd paint and so would he."

"I ate paint when I was younger," Soap interjects with a chuckle.

Simon snorts, "Makes sense." He grabs a tube of grey paint and holds his hand out, "Your hand, sergeant."

Soap does it without hesitation. Simon holds his hand up and squeezes out a palm full of paint. Simon smears it around his wrist and between his fingers and slides the canvas over, "Here."

Simon presses his hand onto it. Soap pulls it back, feeling like a five-year-old. There's a fuzzy splotchy handprint smack dab in the middle.

"You don't use brushes?"

"Joseph didn't." He says, "It's easier to clean a child's hand than a thousand plastic brushes."

Soap picks the canvas up, dragging a finger across it. Paint builds under his fingernails.

"And the monochrome?" He asks.

Simon shrugs, "I've tried others, but there's too many. Makes my eyes hurt."

Soap sets the canvas back down. He watches as Simon slides it back over, filling in the rest with a smear of black paint. It splashes off the side. His method is imperfect, leaving plenty of dry spots. He's careful to not cover anything Soap has done, even though it's childish. It only takes a few seconds, but they're left with a black square with a single grey blob of his handprint. Simon wipes the excess paint off on his pants and covers his hand in white paint. He flips the canvas over and gently presses his hand on top of Soap's handprint. When he pulls it back, he sees a clear outline of Simon's hand. Where their palms meet, the paint mixes and swirls, imprinting the texture of both their hands. Simon dumps more black paint on his hand and covers the edges of the canvas.

"You only need a few." He clarifies, handing the dripping piece back to Soap.

He puts it on the counter next to his other painting. Paint drips down the counter and onto the cabinets, "Thank you."

"For what?"

Soap turns towards him and their knees touch, "For telling me. For showing me."

"I told you, Johnny, I trust you," He places a kiss on the side of Soap's mouth, "But I do feel like I'm the one doing all the sharing." He whispers. Simon cups Soap's face, coating his cheeks in paint. He doesn't mind. He definitely doesn't mind when Simon kisses him again.

"Not true. I told you I ate paint as a child. Besides, can't do that much talking when you're...You're..."

"Doing this?" He does it again.

Soap shudders, "Tell you what," He purrs, "I'll tell you everything you want to know...at Halloween."

Simon pulls back a little, "Dirty. But fair."

"I always play dirty L.t." He smirks, "All is fair in love and war."

Simon grabs Soap by his shirt and pulls him into his lap. He trails

kisses along his jaw and shoulder before letting his head rest there. Big strong arms wrap around Soap, holding him tight.

"You have any more stupid poems?" He murmurs.

"You got any more bad jokes?"

"I like yours better. They make sense coming from you. About the only thing that does."

"They're not mine," He chuckles, "but I've got one."

"These are your own words
your way of noticing
and saying plainly
of not turning away
from hurt

you have offered them
to me I am only
giving them back

if only I could show you
how very useless
they are not."

"Craig Arnold. American, but I always liked this one."

"Topical."

Soap kisses his ear, then his shoulder, rubbing circles on his back. And as nice as this is, it's also uncomfortable as fuck. His knees are digging into the solid tile floor, making his legs and hips go numb.

"Mind if we take this to the couch? I'm losing feeling in some important areas."

"What if I said no?" Simon teases.

"You don't want to know. I picked up a lot in Las Almas."

Simon releases him. Soap stands and stretches out, his hip popping very loudly. But it isn't long before they've resettled on Simon's couch. Soap puts his feet on the coffee table as Simon lays against his chest. He runs a hand lazily through Simon's choppy hair. It's longer and softer than it had been in the hospital. The tips are lighter too.

Simon fiddles with the sleeves of his shirt. He's still wearing the butcher shop shirt over it, although now it's stained with paint.

"I've got to ask-" Soap says.

"I'm not sharing until I hear something about you." He interrupts gruffly. Soap chuckles until Simon looks up to glare at him. He's serious.

"Anything specific?"

Simon is still for a minute. He's gone from picking at his shirt to picking at his uneven nails. "The poems."

"My parents are poetry fans. They'd copy them down, pass them to each other as notes. Just grew up hearing them around the house."

Simon's eyes flick to the bookshelf, "Sounds like they love each other."

"Yeah." He says, his heart tightens, "About the only thing they do." He adds softly. He doesn't even mean to say it.

Simon doesn't press and Soap considers asking him about the shirt, but he'd asked so much of him already. It's easier to ask about another person's life, especially when they keep it so guarded. While Simon had been right about him being an asshole, Soap hadn't been much better.

"They're disappointed. In me." He clarifies, "They met while in university. My mother finished her degree while she was pregnant with me. They had high hopes for their first born. Even higher with my good marks in primary school. Then they started to drop as I got older. I couldn't focus, got my ADHD diagnosis."

Soap lets it spill forth. It wasn't often he talked about his parents. When he did, he'd say the bare minimum. There was no point in saying anything. When your parents love each other, especially as openly as his parents, people forget that that doesn't mean they automatically love their children.

"They came to terms with my choice to pursue football instead of university then my sister got accepted into a fancy private school. Then I joined the military and I felt this, withdrawal, I think is the way to put it. One child had surpassed the other and they didn't have much care for me after that. Didn't even respond when I told them I'd joined the SAS. I got a *congrats* two days later." The bitterness sits

thick on his tongue.

"You have a sister?" Simon asks softly.

Soap thinks back to the file that is still on the coffee table, now displaced by his feet. He hadn't let himself think about it for too long, but Simon had a brother. Was he older, younger? The file didn't say. Soap had always seen him as an only child. *Wait*, that's his own fault for thinking that. His behavior in Las Almas could only be explained by having been an older brother. His groans had given Simon power. He knew because it's exactly what he did with Melanie.

The comment also makes him realize that he hadn't actually talked about Melanie to anyone he's worked with. Stuff like that rarely came up.

"Yeah, she's my baby sister. Love her to death."

"Where is she now?"

"America. Shortly after I enlisted, she finished at her prep school and applied to a good school in America. She graduated last year."

"She still there?"

"Yeah. I think she's working an internship or something like that. She's going to be a doctor." He can't help but mimic his father's prideful tone. His kind of pride was the kind that also expressed his shame. *She's going to be a doctor. Oh, the other one? He's going to some other country. Hope he doesn't die.* Is what it said.

"Her name is Melanie."

Simon presses back against Soap's chest, digging his head under Soap's chin.

"You said you had a question?"

"It can wait." Soap continues to run his hands through Simon's hair. He reaches up and grabs Soap's wrist. Was it bothering him? Just as Soap questions this, Simon moves his hand to his collarbone and holds it there.

"Actually I do. Price forced me into planning a get together. We're celebrating Halloween at my place. Going to watch movies, probably eat junk food and drink. Well, we'll drink. I suspect you won't."

"No. Was there a question in there?"

"Yes. I'm asking you to come."

"Just ask."

"I just did?"

Simon shifts, "I meant about the drinking. How'd you know?"

"I noticed you hadn't touched your bourbon at the bar. Or any of the drinks at my place."

"Most people don't notice. So ask."

"Ask what?"

"Why I don't."

Soap had his suspicions, but it wasn't his place to voice them. That's something his parents would do.

"That's your business. Though I do wonder why you said you prefer Kentucky if you don't drink."

"My choice at weddings and funerals. It's the one thing my father didn't drink." He adds. His eyes widen slightly, as if he hadn't meant to say that.

Soap sucks on his lips, not acknowledging the slip. Simon had shared a lot with him in the last 24 hours. He had to have been nearing a limit. Hell, Soap's nearing a limit on personal sharing and he hadn't dumped a file with the worst parts of his life right in front of his friend.

"It's good that you have your sister." He says. His voice crackles.

"Yeah."

"I'll come."

"What?" Soap's voice cracks. Simon punches his leg, hard.

"Keep it together, MacTavish. I meant I'll come to your Halloween party."

"It's not a party."

"It's a party."

Simon kisses his hand and places it on his chest. His calloused fingers curl into Soap's, intertwining as if they were meant to fit together. If Simon would let him, he'd kiss each knuckle, just to show him how cherished he is.

"You have any plans today?" He asks.

Soap shakes his head, "No. You?"

"Some." His voice takes on a new tone.

"Like what?"

He flips around, straddling Soap's hips.

He gulps, "Thought you didn't do this often?"

Simon grips the back of the couch, "I don't. Doesn't mean I don't know a thing or two. 'Specially when it comes to you."

Soap grabs his face, pulling Simon's lips to his. "Prove it."

Simon pulls back, but only as far as Soap lets him. His eyes travel down his face and chest. "I haven't already?"

Soap takes his feet off the table and leans forward. He teases Simon, brushing his lips against his, but stopping short of an actual kiss. Simon inhales deeply and holds it. *We'll see how long that lasts.* He kisses along his jaw. The rough stubble that dots it scratches at his lips. The muscles in Simon's back tense. A warmth blossoms in Soap, traveling up from his stomach to his face.

Simon was *his*. Not only was Soap allowed to exist in the same universe as him, he could share in his space and his memories.

Simon links his hand with Soap's, lifting his arm above their heads. Then he trails his fingers down his arm. Soap's shivers under his touch, his back arching, pressing even further into Simon. His hand continues to travel down bringing warmth and electricity with it. Soap gasps as Simon digs his fingers into his thigh. He buries his face in Simon's neck, feeling his pulse underneath all the kisses he left there.

He throws his head back as Simon spreads his legs apart, then grasping his thighs, he picks Soap up. Instinctively, he wraps his legs around Simon's hips and holds onto his shoulders. They're so close and

Soap can't breathe. His erratic heart rate blurs his vision and makes him dizzy. *Simon* makes him dizzy. He always does and if they kept up with this, Soap isn't sure he would be able to survive the week.

"Why do you look so surprised, MacTavish?" He purrs.

He kisses him before Soap can answer. He holds the kiss, grasping onto the back of Simon's hair as he carries them somewhere else in the flat. His back slams against a door before it falls out from under him. Simon kicks it closed and Soap finally pulls his face away long enough to look around.

He'd carried them to the bedroom. Much like the rest of the flat, the curtains are pulled shut and the walls are sparse. A closet hangs open with various t-shirts and long-sleeves of primarily black shades. One half had jeans folded over hangers. A duffle bag is shoved in the bottom. A lamp had been left on, illuminating the space. That's all his glimpses before he's kissing Simon again.

Soap rubs his hands down Simon's neck, his thumb settling in the hollow where neck becomes shoulder. He presses down. Simon's hisses, his arms going slack enough for Soap to jump down and toss Simon onto the bed. It's his turn to straddle him. Simon's hands come to rest on his hips, pressing him closer ever-so-slightly. Soap leans over, placing his hands on either side of Simon's head, boxing him in.

The yellow lamp light swaths him in golden light. His lips part slightly in a small crooked grin. Soap's heart leaps at his beauty. He can't help but hold his face, running his thumb along Simon's jaw.

He pushes his face against Simon's in a messy kiss, nowhere near the softness of just moments before. Their teeth clash but it doesn't matter because Simon's gripping his mohawk, twisting the hairs in his hand. Soap's hand dips below the waist of Simon's sweats...

A phone rings somewhere in the flat.

"Fuck me." Simon says, lips still pressed against Soap's.

"I was *trying*."

The phone continues to ring.

"Just let them leave a voice-mail." He bites at Simon's ear. He shudders underneath him, but ultimately pushes Soap off him, groaning the entire time.

"It's Price."

"Call him back later."

"Can't. Last time I did that, he was busting down my door. Old man is scary when he wants to be." Simon hops off the bed.

Soap lays on his back with his arms spread out.

"Make it quick, cause I'm not leaving this bed."

Simon disappears into the living room. Soap hadn't been lying when he said he wasn't leaving the bed. The mattress is soft. So soft that he sinks into it. There's only a grey top sheet left on it, the rest of the bedding bundled on the floor near the couch. A single end table sits empty next to the bed, the drawer slightly ajar. It must have been where he kept his file. No wonder he didn't sleep in here.

His voice is muffled through the closed door but it's clear Simon isn't doing most of the talking. His sentences are clipped and short. It doesn't sound like a simple check in. Soap rises to his elbows and watches as Ghost enters, his phone to his ear. He nods, like Price can see him. His eyes are on the floor listening intently. After a few more unseen nods, Ghost hangs up. His lips are pressed in a thin line.

"Laswell has information on Makarov." He says hoarsely, "Price wants us to meet at his place. Doesn't trust the information over the phone."

All the fun drains out of Soap, replaced by cold hard professionalism. "When?"

"Now."

Chapter End Notes

Longer chapter this time, how are we feeling?

I went back and forth on this chapter, constantly reworking scenes and trying to get Soap's thinking across.

On other news, I'm working on a YouTube and Spotify playlist for my Call of Duty fics. They'll have the songs chapters and works are named after. Tonally, they will be all over the place, but that's fine with me. Don't know if you guys would be interested in that.

Anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter and happy fic hunting!

back to my whispering mind

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song Pale Sun Rose by Matthew and the Atlas

I created that [playlist](#) I teased last week. It'll update when I post the new chapter and you guys can listen to the songs if you like. I had to make it on YouTube because half the songs aren't available on Spotify.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Price opens the door with a grim expression. It'd taken a bit of navigating to get to his place. The building is buried within a few businesses and lacks clear signage. A literal hole in the wall that disappears the closer you look. Perfect for Price.

He steps aside to let them in. If they weren't here on work, Soap would have given himself time to look around, get to know the man he counted on every day for support and protection. Instead, he and Ghost beeline for the nearest seats – dining chairs surrounding a small circular table. Price's flat opens straight into the kitchen. It is a mess, covered in papers and gadgets. The work never stops for him. Space had been cleared on the table to make room for a bulky laptop, one loaded with all sorts of encryption software and databases. Gaz is already there, sitting and leaning on the table, ready for whatever Laswell has to say.

Price slams the door shut, bolting it with a million different locks. Something he'd expected Ghost's place to have, not Price.

He presses a few buttons on the laptop and the screen goes from black to a bright white. A few more clicks and a video call begins, a little grey circle spinning in the middle of the screen. Price leans on Soap's chair. In a few seconds, a pixelated Laswell comes on screen. Her hair is a mess, like she'd just gotten out of bed. One side is lopsided.

"Can you boys hear me?" She adjusts something offscreen and the image clears a bit.

"Yes, sir." Price readjusts himself, "Tell them what you told me."

She launches straight into it. "Soap, in your report you theorized that

Makarov was running guns through small towns."

It's not a question, but a statement. Soap nods, "We wouldn't catch onto smaller shipments."

Ghost leans forward, his mask back on his face. Still no makeup, but he didn't need it to make his eyes look dark. "He can also wipe out towns to minimize resistance without anyone noticing."

"Both things to worry about." She agrees.

Price is the next one to speak, "Shortly before we left, we sent a team in to check out the weapons cache Soap and Ghost found."

"Needless to say, they were better prepared than we were. They found coded manifests but just the right amount of pressure and we got one of Makarov's men to give up the goods. Soap was right."

A hollow pit forms in Soap's stomach.

"What you'd find Laswell?" Gaz leans forward even more, a soft frown on his face.

"Nothing too concrete yet. Even decoded, the manifests are light on details. The men also don't know that much. He's doing a good job controlling the flow of information."

"But," Price presses a key and another screen pops up, partially obscuring Laswell's face, "They did find this, buried amongst a communications log. They hadn't had the chance to clear it before we got to it."

Soap pulls the laptop closer to him. Laswell hadn't been kidding when she said they were scant on details. The best thing they've got is a six sentence conversation between the men stationed at the town and an unknown party. In this conversation, the unknown party gives a location – Soap's best guess given the context as it looks like a random string of letters. The men then confirm and throw out three numbers. Unknown confirms then gives a time. Men confirm. The last line looks like a warning.

Price taps the screen, "That last one went unsent. It was intercepted before it could go through. Whoever the unknown party is, they never got it."

"Makarov." Ghost growls.

"Presumably. Or someone close to him."

Gaz turns the screen towards him, "We have an ID on this location yet?"

"That's a negative." Laswell answers, "We're working on that and once we do, we're sending men out on this."

"When do we leave?"

Price clenches his fist, his knuckles going white. His voice is low, dripping in disagreement, "We don't."

Laswell sighs, "We need you all well rested and not going after weapons caches. Our hope is, we hit enough of them fast enough, we weaken Makarov enough to give us a hint of where he's at."

"That's when we come in?"

"Positive Garrick. We've got men on the ground right now."

"We need to move fast," Ghost looks to each of them in turn, "We hit enough of these and Makarov's going to know we're on to him. One or two places going down is expected. Anymore and we lose him." He finishes, looking straight at Laswell.

Her gaze is unwavering, "Let's not let it happen."

"So what do we do till then?" Soap asks, but he knows exactly what she's going to say next. So does Ghost and Price and Gaz.

"We wait."

Gaz hits the table, "Bullshit! He *slaughtered* an entire town. Just tell us where and we'll deal with it."

"We don't have *where*, Garrick. I wish I had more, but I don't. You are officially as informed as I am."

There's a ding from her computer. She clicks around, eyes darting across the screen. Her brow furrows. Price leans in close over Soap's shoulder.

"What is it, Kate?"

"Give me a minute."

Soap continues to study the communications log. The given location is entirely gibberish, but a familiar gibberish. Which didn't make sense. Gibberish means it has no meaning. So why did he recognize it?

Ghost places a soft hand on his, "What do you see?"

"Laswell?"

"What is it, Soap?" It takes her a second to pull her gaze from whatever it was that had disturbed her.

"I think I know where those weapons were supposed to go."

It takes his brain a long time to pull the exact place he knew that specific number sequence from. He'd beat himself up for it except there was no way he was right. But there was also a slim chance it was a coincidence.

He reads the string of numbers out loud just to make sure he has it right, "I could be wrong, but I think it's referring to a town in Southern Russia."

"What are you talking about?" Price's gaze is stern, making Soap question his entire thought process. But he can't back down now that he's begun.

"It's an exam score. I'd remember this particular one because it was the worst I'd ever done on a room clearance exam."

"Are you sure, sergeant? They could just be random numbers." Laswell's voice comes in crackly over the computer's poor stereo.

As Soap speaks, the memory comes back clearer – his instructor handing him that stupid scoring sheet with that barely passing score on it all because he'd chosen to help another person. He'd shoved the sheet in his journal with the rest of the exam notes he'd written down.

"Yes." A bitterness creeps up his throat.

"How could you remember that?" Gaz asks.

"The same way you or I remember our birthday or holidays. It sticks with you. But I can double check some journals to be sure."

"It couldn't hurt to check." Price pats his back, "Good work." He says low enough that the microphone can't hear it.

"It's better than nothing."

"Flit it by one of Makarov's men," Ghost says, "See if they recognize the place."

"I'll send the message along once I get the exact location." Soap says. He'd have to dig that journal out of his closet.

"What was the message about, Kate?" Price asks again. His hand remains on Soap's shoulder.

She sighs, "It's too early for this." She continues, a bit louder, "You aren't going to like this, but brass just sent me this."

Price's laptop pings and he opens the new attachment. Four personnel files open in quick succession.

"After what happened in September, they don't think the four of you are cutting it."

Price's voice goes low. The edge of his words are sharp, "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't shoot the messenger, John. They aren't happy that all four of you ended up in the hospital."

"Because of bad intelligence. Intelligence that *they* supplied." Price slaps the table.

"I know." Laswell grits her teeth, "But they think you've gotten too comfortable. Lazy. They aren't going to let the 141 go after Makarov unless you get some new blood. Someone they trust."

"I don't care who they trust."

"The files I sent you are your options. You only have to choose one."

Price pushes off Soap's chair.

"What about Farah?" Gaz supplies, "Or Alex?"

Price runs a hand down his face, "No. They wouldn't approve them. Not after what they pulled in Urzikstan."

Ghost pulls the laptop towards him, studying a file closely.

"What are our options?"

"They're all SAS and were part of the team that seized the first weapons cache. Kevin Fairbrass. Craig McKid. Murray Henrikson. G-"

"Gary Sanderson." Ghost spins the computer back around, a single file filling the screen.

The guy in the photo looks young, but the date of birth puts him around Soap's age, a year or so younger though. His nose is straight and somewhat flat, the bridge begins higher on his face, pairing surprisingly well with slightly flared nostrils. His eyes are soft, hooded, but bright. The hazel shows even in the picture. His jaw is strong, sloping into a wide rounded chin. Freckles dot his face and disappear into auburn stubble. Pretty boy, is the best way to describe him.

"You know him?" Soap asks, continuing to study the file.

"Worked with him once. Back in 2018."

"You trust him?" Gaz asks, a hint of amazement in his voice, the same amazement that colours Soap's cheeks. Did he trust him?

"No."

Gaz and Soap make the same face. Of course. Ghost didn't trust anyone that wasn't within his immediate circle. Hell, it'd taken getting betrayed by Graves and Shepherd for Soap to feel even a hint of trust between them.

"But, he's good. Quiet. Loyal."

"Loyal to whom?" Soap asks. Loyal wasn't always a good trait. Loyal is what got Graves trying to kill them. That and maybe some other power trip issues. He jumped to war crimes a bit quickly for someone merely following orders.

"From what I saw? His team. He was new to the SAS at the time I met him."

"Do you recognize any of the others?" Price asks.

Ghost shakes his head.

"When do they want their answer?"

"I'd say as soon as possible if you want on the field any time soon."

"Dammit. Ghost," Price approaches him, "I'm trusting you on this. Would Sanderson be your choice?"

"That's your decision, Captain."

"Well I'm asking my Lieutenant."

Ghost stares at Price with a steely look only he could muster. Soap counts two beats before he gives Price an answer. "Yes, sir."

Price slides the laptop to Gaz, so far the only person who hasn't seen it yet.

"I want this to be unanimous." He says, "Either of you say no and we do something different."

Gaz grimaces, "Is it really just these four?"

"Yes." Laswell is unsuccessful in hiding the irritation in her voice.

"Then I agree with Ghost."

"Same here." Soap says without hesitation. Ghost vouching for him was enough proof in his mind. If this guy couldn't be trusted, well, then it wouldn't be new territory.

"Gary Sanderson," Laswell reads, "Passed selection in 2016. Superiors note a stubborn streak that ultimately resulted in successful missions. They also note that he acts before speaking. Just recently made sergeant rank."

"I like a stubborn streak."

"He's your choice?"

"Gary Sanderson." Price confirms.

"I'll send that info off then. As well as whatever location you come up with Soap."

"Thank you," Price has calmed now, his voice softer as he picks up the laptop, "Get some sleep, Kate. And tell your wife I said hello."

"I will. And I promise I'll get back to you as soon as I know more."

"See you soon." The screen goes white.

Price leans on the table, grey eyes on Soap, "Are you sure about this?"

"As sure as I can be." But the racing in his heart tells him he's right.

"Double check and get that info to me."

Ghost stands, dropping a lazy hand on Soap's shoulder. It falls quickly and Soap's unsure if it's an accident or not.

"I'll walk you home."

He gives him a terse nod.

"I don't want you to look like a knob in front of Laswell or anything," Gaz says, leaning back with crossed arms, "But I really hope you're wrong."

"Believe me. I don't like the idea of Makarov having that kind of information either."

—

"So," Ghost says as soon as they're standing outside Price's flat, "You keep journals?"

"Always have."

"Even in Las Almas?"

"I was a bit busy, but yeah. Updated after that shit wrapped up."

Ghost jams his hands in his jacket pockets, his eyes shifting around the hallway.

"Do you have something you want to ask?"

"Are you sure you want me digging around your past?"

"What do you mean? I dug around your past."

"I *invited* you to. There's a difference. Besides, those were all files. Clinical. Factual. These are journals."

"I give you permission. There," He bumps his shoulder, "Happy? Besides, you wanted me to share more."

"On your own time. I was able to share those with you because I

wanted to. Makarov didn't force me to."

"Yet." He adds, "If Makarov knows what I scored on *informal* exams that I took years ago, he can find what's in your classified files. You think this would stop with me?" He lowers his voice as they reach the stairwell.

Ghost stops a few steps above him. The light in the stairwell is abysmal, only a blue-white light above the door. Ghost is back lit by it. It's a chilling image, a large black mass, blurred by the artificial light behind him. A ghost on the stairwell and a reminder of their mission.

"This won't stop until we put him in the dirt Johnny. But to do that, we need your journal."

"I don't want him in the dirt. I want him in pieces."

"It's a good thing you're good at that then, isn't it?"

Soap makes for his bedroom immediately after re-locking the front door, trusting Ghost to be right behind him. His flat isn't his flat anymore, it's another objective. Clear it and get the intel.

He hadn't looked at any of his journals in recent years. The moment he filled one, it went into a box at the bottom of his closet. He'd lost count of how many he'd tossed in there, making it even more amazing he remembered even a single thing within them. They weren't meant to actually record anything. They were just a place to vent and unload. Much like blowing things up.

So much of it comes back to him as he steps into the darkness of his room. Him, posted up in some dusty place, fresh out of boot camp with his journal millimeters from his face. He'd scribbled down every thought and taught himself to draw. There are probably a lot of fond memories hidden within those pages as well as many sleepless stress-filled nights. They'd been a major part of his routine during his various deployments. Ghost waits by the door, looking back and forth from the main door to Soap. Even here he melts easily into the shadows, almost as if they're already back in the field, the comforting weight of a firearm in their hands. His presence eases some of Soap's worries. He's not alone. Neither of them are.

The closet is stuffed with clothing and bags, springing open almost as soon as he touches the door. He used it everyday but now it feels like

something different. As if a bomb were hidden inside instead of a box of battered books. He slides an old cardboard box out.

The book on top is his most recent one. He'd spent the first day of leave writing down everything he could remember about the operation and the days in the hospital before dumping it with the others. He'd rambled for pages upon pages. Most of it had to be incoherent.

The journals are all different, picked up in corner shops around the world. Some are made of nicer materials while others are held together with staples and tape.

He starts stacking the newer ones to the side. Each fit about two to three years worth of information in them. Pages poke out. Other souvenirs like leaves, grass, and flowers stick out as well.

The journals on top didn't have anything written on the outside. The older ones did. His name stares back at him with dates scrawled above it. The handwriting is so neat and new and unbothered.

He joined the SAS in 2014. This exercise had been before this. Most likely in his very first journal.

Right at the bottom of the box is a leather bound journal. Not real leather, there was no way he could have afforded that. A sticky note is situated on the cover with the year 2012-2015 written in black marker.

Soap pulls it out gingerly, feeling a thin line of tackiness dotted with little paper balls, parts of the cardboard box that had been ripped up by the disintegrated rubber band that had held in its content. Underneath the journal are the remains of said decade old rubber band. It could have snapped on its own. It was a decade old after all.

Or...

It could have snapped when someone touched it.

He flips it open to a borderline illegible first page. The pencil lead is smeared all over it, even obscuring some of the faded lines. Some of the words are only salvaged by his heavy hand that practically engraved them into the cheap lined paper.

Happy Fucking birthday to me. 16 at last.

There's a smudged drawing of a birthday cake in the corner.

The words feel like they belong to a different person. A child instead of the man the author thought himself of.

Later in the journal is a page with a single date on it, scratched in heavy lines – 2013.

The entries that followed were less like traditional journal entries as he was in the thick of his early career, biding his time before he could apply to the SAS. The worst are slanted and eager. Soap sits crisscross, thumbing through the pages of his life before Price, before the 141, and even before the SAS.

Training exercises and real missions mingle together with references and inside jokes that Soap had long forgotten the meaning of. The messy notes next to them did little to remind him. He'd drawn maps and pictures of other soldiers he hadn't seen in years. The drawings are crude, a far cry from anything he'd drawn as of late. Even if he did remember the people they depicted, he doubts these pictures would match up with reality.

Underneath these maps are small numbers. Coordinates for real missions. Codes for others, the training exercises. They come back to him. He'd pulled out the journal (never truly put it away in those days) but his eyes never left the instructor in front of him. He'd copied down the map as best as he could in order to memorize every inch of it. In school, he copied down notes verbatim because it helped him visualize the actual lecture come exam time. That stopped working once he couldn't bring himself to pay attention to said lectures.

Soap calls to mind the code Makarov used as he continues to flip through, getting dangerously close to 2014. Maybe he actually had misremembered and would look like a total git.

But then he comes to one with dark heavy marks across the accompanying map.

FUCKING BULLSHIT.

Past Soap laments how his instructor had tore into him for prioritizing a friend over the mission. The other soldier twisted her ankle during the exercise and wasn't comfortable going forward. Soap had the fastest time when it came to room clearance, but he'd run out the clock helping her complete the exercise with him.

Soap brushes his fingers across the page. There it was. The confirmation that he wasn't hoping to see. Underneath it is a crude drawing of his instructor that day. The pencil lead is smeared from his rushed hand.

Ghost kneels next to him, the pose so alien to him. He hunches, as if trying to look small. Soap didn't want him to be small. He wanted him to be large, to shield him from what he was seeing. He'd had to dig for this. The pages look untouched since the days he'd sullied them with his hand. He flips through them, not looking at any of them.

"I'll call Price." Ghost says softly, holding onto Soap's shoulder as he stands.

Soap's hand shoots out, grabbing Ghost's wrist. His pulse thrums steady and strong under Soap's thumb. It takes a slight tug from him to bring Ghost back down to his level.

There's a buzzing in his ears, a low one as well as a heavy dizziness. He sways, picturing Makarov slinking through the dark of his home. He brushes his fingers across every surface with gloves to protect his identity. Soap would never know, not until he wanted him to. He cracks that stupid grin, the one that belongs to someone who sees themselves as more clever than they actually are. His intention hadn't been to find the journal. No. Just to exist in Soap's life and leave his stench behind. The journal had just been a bonus. Something he could use to let them know.

A solid hand grasps Soap's hand.

"Johnny." Ghost's voice is firm, almost too loud. It echoes in the space between Soap's ears. Every bit of him is hollow.

"What?"

The grip on Soap's arm tightens. Ghost yanks his hand away, holding it away from both of them.

"Tell me where you're at."

For probably the first time in a long time, Soap can't bring himself to look Ghost in the eyes because he's too focused on something else.

The red half-moon marks on Simon's wrist. One seeps a small amount of blood, already dried.

Bile rises in his throat, burning and sour, finding its familiar resting place at the back of his throat. The buzzing increases, fighting the blood racing through his ears for the loudest sounds. It's too loud. He can't breathe. Makarov in his flat. Ghost in his flat. Ghost bleeding in his flat. In a hospital bed. In a hole in the middle of a fucking forest. *Makarov in his fucking flat.*

Simon presses his cheek against Soap's. His skin burns at the touch. Both of them are too warm. His clothes scratch against his skin, itchy. He needs to claw them off, burn them with the same hands that had drawn Simon's blood.

Simon's hot breath washes over his back with words that Soap just barely hears.

Two soldiers are in a tank...

One turns to the other...

He pulls back, hands still firmly on Soap's shoulders, "What do you think they say?"

Soap's breath is shallow, his words quiet and starved for air, "Don't know."

He chuckles to himself, "Blubblub."

Soap can't help himself. Out of reflex he sucks in a shaky, but deep breath, only to exhale it in a groaning laugh. At the joke. At Simon's face. At having heard *blubblub* come from this giant's deep-ass voice combined with that adorable proud chuckle that followed.

He pulls Simon back to him pressing into cheek and mirroring his breathing. The bile begins to seep back, retreating for another day. He buries his face into Simon's neck, inhaling the scent of generic soap and sweat, grateful he can breathe again. That hadn't happened for a long time and he'd always been alone. His parents told him to get over it, get studying, or go outside.

Soap pushes off of Ghost, using him to stand. The journal is still clutched in his hand. Now the pages are bent, straining under his clenched fingers. He smooths it and succeeds in further smearing the lead. The once crisp lines he'd been so proud of are blurry, words becoming illegible.

"I'll call Price. You take a moment to yourself." Ghost says gruffly.

Soap tosses the journal to the bed. It bounces onto the ground, thumping loudly. He grits his teeth until pain travels to his eyes. He has to tamp down a spark of rage born from frustration. With a single string of digits, Makarov had Soap falling apart. Just like he wanted. He shouldn't let some dobber who thought he was smarter than he was get to him. Fuck him.

Ghost steps into the doorway, pulling his phone from his pocket.

Soap shakes his hands out, feeling a numbness begin to overtake them. Gaz's anger at the table had been the right course of action. Makarov deserved everything that was coming for him and knowing that it was just a game to him made Soap's blood boil.

Ghost speaks in a clipped tone, the words lost to Soap through the returned buzzing. He continues to shake his hands, trying to shake away the energy building in his limbs, begging for action. He couldn't wait. Makarov needed to be taken care of. He clenches his fist, needing to do something.

He throws his fist at the wall, preparing for the cracking of plaster across his knuckles, imaging the whiteness of it as Makarov's teeth.

Instead, his hand is enveloped in warmth. His head whips up to Ghost. The phone is gone, returned to his pocket.

"Get it together Soap."

"I'm going to fucking kill him."

"Know when to use that energy, but right now is not the time."

"I know."

"Good."

The buzz still lingers in his arm, urging him into action. He huffs, like a bull. Ghost's hand is still on his, holding back his anger.

He's somehow always there in the most imperfect perfect way. Amazing how he could be so ignorant to his own issues but so aware of your own. There's too many reasons Soap has for why he likes Simon, too many to name.

He wants to be angry. He needs to be fucking pissed, but he can't when Ghost is looking at him like this. He's focused. Looking more

like he does on the field than he has in the past few weeks. It's the same look that always had Soap's mind wandering on the field. His voice even takes on that same tone that he used to keep him going on the field.

Heat builds in his cheeks. Soap frees his hand and grabs both sides of Ghost's face. Their faces clash, noses colliding and sending tears to his eyes. He kisses Ghost through the mask. His eyes go wide. It's pleasant only because it's Simon. The balaclava scratches his dry lips. It blocks Simon's taste.

He pulls back long enough to register the shock on his face. Then he's kissing the fabric. Begging to bring him close. To convert this heat into something positive instead of all consuming. Simon had been there. Simon understood and somehow managed to keep him from falling apart, the beautiful bastard.

"Johnny." Ghost grabs his shoulders, pushing him back a bit. The itching breathlessness returns, aching to pull him back and find that comfort that existed between them whenever they were in bed together.

"What?"

"Do you actually want this, or do you want a distraction?"

"What's wrong with a distraction?" *I want it. I need it. Please Simon.*

"Why can't you slow down, Soap? Take a fucking second to get yourself together."

His whole body trembles. The weight of the past few months settles on him. He just wants to hold Simon and find that freedom he'd had for just a moment when they first kissed. Where had that gone?

"What is the problem?"

"The distraction is the problem! As soon as it's done you'll be pissed off again and breaking your fist open on a wall! Trust me."

Soap purses lips.

"After Price brought me home, I was lying in my bed in the dark, unable to move. I remember lying there until my organs hurt. I didn't eat. I didn't even piss. Because when I got up and finally brushed my teeth after weeks, I saw my face. Saw what that bastard did to me and

was angry just like you. I punched the mirror until I broke five bones in my hand. It was a great distraction while it lasted."

Soap sees it clearly. Ghost leaning over a bathroom sink, hand and mirror smashed to bits, breathing just as heavily as Soap is right now.

"You didn't need to tell me that."

"I did so you'd understand that I'm saying no. Find something else, as long as it's working through what you're feeling."

"I'm feeling like I want to punch Makarov's teeth in."

"Well you can't bust mine in, despite your best effort."

Soap chuckles and rests his head on Ghost's shoulder. As if enough physical contact between them could fix everything.

"I still like touching you. Reminding myself you're real."

"In only a few senses of the word."

"You're real to me." He says more to himself than to Ghost. "But so is Makarov."

"Right. So how are you going to solve that problem?"

"I'm gonna practice my punching."

Chapter End Notes

Struggled immensely with this chapter (:

I'm stirring in some more plot. Hope it doesn't blow up in my face.

sweet wonderful you

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song You Make Loving Fun by Fleetwood Mac

Title Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

30 October 2023|Gym|02:06:27|John MacTavish|Simon Riley

Soap had imagined many things with Ghost at his side, all born of newly indulged and discovered feelings. Things like dinner and movies. Gym trips were included. After two years of Ghost fighting by his side and watching over him, he couldn't imagine a time where he wouldn't be there. This was before his dreams of Ghost turned to bitter realities. In those fantasies, they were Hallmark characters with no baggage.

Which is why this moment is so surreal. The two of them walk into the same gym he'd been in just two days ago. Ghost's balaclava is tightly situated over his face, but for the first time since their leave started, his skin is visible to the public. Soap himself had only seen it in darkness.

He peels off his jacket as soon as they step into the warm building. They'd stopped at his place long enough for him to change – out of the way for the trip, but well worth it to see Ghost's shoulders.

The anger at Makarov is still there, but it ebbs away at the wonder that is Ghost.

The arm holes of his tank top dip low enough to see his scarred ribs. That angry new burn scar peaks through. That ever present reminder of that day. Although there were many things that prevented him from forgetting. That one just wasn't as sweet.

But then Ghost rolls those broad shoulders back to fully get his jacket off. That reveals his arm tattoo. It fully covers his forearm. In the black inky swirls are greys and skin tones that make skulls, dog tags, and other military images. It was nicely done, if not a bit on the nose.

To be fair, a lot of things about Ghost were on the nose.

He nods his head towards the empty wrestling ring, "Have to try that sometime."

"You just want to pin me."

It's so easy to fall into this pattern, one they had adopted soon after they met. Something he wouldn't have called flirtatious at the time but obviously he knew better now.

He hadn't realized it until they were driving to Alejandro's safe house just exactly how he'd sounded with some of the things he'd said.

The mask...take it off.

Like a good old boy.

He couldn't exactly blame his physical state at the time now like he had then.

"In my experience you do pretty well yourself." He brushes past him towards the far wall. A wooden bench lines the bottom edge, covered in other people's belongings.

Ghost wasn't that much better apparently.

The place is a bit more empty than it had been the last time Soap was here. There's more free space, but that just makes the stares they get all the more prominent, especially with Ghost's balaclava. The quickly fading skull was quite the eye catcher. If only they could see his eyes like Soap could.

"You said you wanted to punch Makarov, show me you've got it."

Soap once again begins to wrap his hands in tape.

Ghost punches his arm.

"What the fuck was that for?"

"Is that how you start a workout MacTavish? Straight into the fight?"

"Are you about to tell me how to work out my anger?"

"I'm about to tell you that if Price saw you start out this way, he'd have you doing worse than I'm about to."

Alright, a kind of hot and threatening thing to say.

"Warm up laps, Soap." He leans against the wall, crossing his incredibly large arms, "I'll tell you when you can stop."

"Do I get a reward for being fast?"

"It depends. Better start running."

Soap smirks at him and relishes in the squint of Ghost's eyes. He drinks in the way they travel up and down.

So he sprints for all he's worth, up and down the length of the building. Simon counts next to him, watching him like a hawk the entire time. The sexy appeal of Ghost getting him to sweat begins to fade. Quite quickly.

As the heat builds in his face, so does the anger he'd been trying to forget. He doesn't consider himself a righteous man, but that was the way to describe his anger at that moment.

It didn't take a particularly smart man to see the dangers of men like Makarov. They ran businesses, churches, and militaries. They did what needed to be done for their cause and their cause alone. They cared nothing for the people they trampled upon. He knew that blueprint well, being a cog in that particular machine.

Shepherd and Graves had been like that. They fought for what they believed in, it's just that they didn't believe in people. They believed in a nation in name alone. Oh how they went on and on about American patriotism.

It wasn't about stopping Hassan because his actions hurt others. It was about the American missiles he was using to do it.

He had this idea when he was younger that the military was this great thing full of those who kept him safe and fought for things he was simply too young to appreciate.

He didn't regret joining. That would mean he regretted meeting the 141 or helping people. But it wasn't the glory he'd been expecting. The real military was filled with more vicious monsters than the real world. But if you wore enough badges, that violence was rebranded as patriotism. It's why he couldn't give two shits about any chest candy. He did this for his own reasons and would disobey orders in a heartbeat.

At least, that's what he told himself to sleep at night.

And this job was the only one that let you stop assholes like Makarov. So he'd call that a win.

Ghost steps off the wall signaling the end of Soap's warmup. Soap is rough when wrapping his hands with boxing tape. The rough edges cut into his hot palms, made red by the blood rushing through him. Ghost raises an eyebrow.

"Do you have something you want to say L.t.?" He snaps, but not at him. He hopes Ghost knows that.

"Good hustle."

"Thanks." Soap huffs, his exertion catching up with him, "Are you going to start sprinting?" He aims to pull back on some of his anger.

"Can't, still haven't been cleared for vigorous activity."

"You didn't strike me as the type to make excuses."

"Give it a few days, Soap. I'll outrun you." He pats his shoulder, pushing him towards the nearest punching bag.

He begins slowly, trying to catch his breath and giving Ghost time to join him. He leans his large body against it so it doesn't move too much during Soap's workout. If only he knew what happened last time.

He spends the next few minutes punching silently, letting his body get back into a familiar rhythm. He'd worked himself too hard during his warmup. A stitch had already formed in his side.

But his thoughts begin to wander back to Makarov again. What was his plan? He's an ultra nationalist, something they've dealt with before. But he's been uncharacteristically quiet since they'd first encountered him. He was nothing special then, something that made his return surprising. The low profile of his weapons cache makes sense, to an extent. Why use an element from Soap's past to label another? That only works if he wants Task Force 141 to find him. A taunt, like a cartoon villain instead of a man. Much like Graves had been once he let the power Shepherd gave him go to his head.

They hadn't found Shepherd either. He'd been M.I.A since Chicago.

Soap had some choice words for him too.

And back to the journal. The journal in his flat. He'd been more focused on how Makarov had been in his flat instead of how he knew where he lived.

Bet that fucker felt *real* smart for that.

Soap throws four quick punches at the bag, sweat pouring into his eyes. Ghost grunts as he braces his body against it.

"Relax, Johnny. You're going to break your hand."

"My *home*, Ghost. He was in my fucking flat. That's the only way he could have known what was in that journal!" He grunts, crashing another fist onto the punching bag.

Ghost grits his, "Breathe."

"I am breathing." He huffs through his nose.

Ghost catches his fist, pushing him away from the bag. Soap swallows down the bile in his throat, shoved there by the hammering of his heart. Ghost tugs his mask farther down.

"Be angry. But don't be stupid. That's what he wants."

Soap rips the boxing tape of his hand with his teeth, hissing as the cool air of the gym graces the new red spots on his knuckles. He spins around, stomping past a confused duo whose eyes are locked on Ghost's balaclava.

"Johnny." He barks after him.

Soap shoves his hand in his bag, looking for his water bottle. Ghost grabs him by his shoulders, spinning him to face him.

He says nothing. His sharp gaze does all the talking.

Focus.

Just look at me.

Breathe.

Soap inhales, holding it for a count of three, then letting it out in the same count. Ghost's dark eyes are like dirt, grounding him to the

earth. Solid, like he was.

"I know he was in your flat. Just be thankful it wasn't while you were there."

"Yeah, well, now I have to move."

"No."

Soap's head shoots up. *What?*

"If you move, Makarov knows that we know. If he wanted you dead, he would have tried already. We do what Laswell said. We lay low." Ghost digs Soap's water bottle out for him.

"Thanks." He dumps some out on his face, relishing in the way Ghost's eyes track the movements. Then he empties the bottle without taking a breath.

As Ghost begins wrapping his hands in boxing tape, he bumps Soap's arm, "I ever tell you my funeral plans?"

Soap chokes on his water, "What? Why the fuck would you bring that up?"

Ghost walks back towards the punching bag, casting a look over his shoulder, "I want to be cremated."

"That doesn't answer my question?" He posts up behind the punching bag, leaning his weight into it, like Ghost had done for him.

He shakes his arms out, popping his neck, "It's my last chance for a smoking body."

"Are you fucking serious?"

Ghost chuckles seconds before throwing his entire body weight into the first punch. Soap's feet slide against the ground. He doesn't have time to correct before Ghost punches twice more in quick, heavy succession.

"Why do you do that?" Soap asks, already out of breath.

"Do what?" Another punch.

"The shitty jokes."

"Gets your mind off things. You can't worry about Makarov if you're laughing."

"I'm not laughing."

"Are you thinking about Makarov?" Ghost looks at him from around the punching bag, steadying it to allow Soap to catch his breath.

"...No."

"Then they're not shitty." The mask obscures it, but Soap has stared at his eyes enough to see a smirk when it happens.

"*Fuck.*"

Ghost unleashes another onslaught as if he hadn't been in a hospital bed a month prior.

"Jokes only work for so long, Lt."

"Then," *punch* "I'll," *punch* "Stay," *punch punch* "With you."

Soap blanches, "What?" His voice cracks, pitching an octave upwards.

Ghost steadies the bag again, "I'll stay with you." Sweat drips down his arms, sticking to the curves of his muscles. *That?* Staying in his flat? Sign Soap up.

"Sit by the front door like a big scary dog." He chuckles, trying to catch his breath.

"Oh. Real funny."

"I thought so." He cracks his knuckles, shooting Soap a bright look, one that screamed *look at me, for I glow brightly.*

And that cheeky bastard knew that! He kicks the bag. Not a roundhouse or any form of side kick. No, that'd be too basic for Ghost. He kicks forward and out, like he was kicking a door and not a punching bag that Soap was currently leaning against.

Soap flies to the ground, saved only by the slick sweaty gym mat underneath him. It still fucking hurts. It's just a dull pain instead of a sharp one.

Ghost fucking *saunters* over to him, his hips swinging with each drawn out step. He leans over, hands on his knees. Soap squints through the

bright fluorescents that shroud Ghost's face in shadow.

"I meant it."

"Like moving in?" That's it. Soap's brain short circuits.

"Fuck no." He snorts, grabbing Soap by the front of his shirt and yanking him to his feet.

Surprisingly, Soap's not disappointed. Relief floods through him in the form of a *oh thank God*.

"You think I need you to scare away the boogeyman?"

Ghost looks down at him through those light eyelashes of his. They're touching chest to chest. Soap presses closer, a challenge.

"Oi, if you're going to fight, take it outside!" A trainer yells at them. All eyes land on them.

Ghost waves the trainer off before pulling Soap to the side.

He lowers his voice. "I meant it. I'll sleep on your couch if you don't feel safe."

"No. I don't need that."

"Are you sure?"

"Jesus, Ghost. Yes, I'm sure. And I think we both know what would happen if you slept on my couch."

He raises an eyebrow at that, "I'm a professional, Soap."

"I'm not. Besides, we don't want Makarov to know something is up. You said it yourself."

"Just call me if anything feels off."

"You promise you'll do the same?" Soap shifts his weight, discomfort tickling the back of his neck. They'd quickly gone from sweaty horned up flirting to quiet sincerity. They're still touching chest to chest. But the discomfort also comes from rejecting his offer. His initial relief is still there, glad Ghost wasn't jumping headfirst into something so domestic and obviously out of his comfort zone, but it didn't mean he could so readily give up on having him so close all the time. Not for the reason Ghost wanted to be there, no. He wanted to know he was

safe just as badly as he wanted to hold him.

But he couldn't trust himself to not shut down in his arms. Too much of a good thing and all that.

And he couldn't trust Ghost to not cut and run. Felt like shit thinking that.

Ghost is still silent.

"Promise me." He grits.

"I'll call."

"And you call Price. We keep each other informed. No more radio silence. Not with Makarov."

"Is he the only reason?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

He crosses those large arms of his. "I told you why I didn't call.

"I remember. Just pointing out that that won't fly anymore. Especially not with me. I can't handle that again."

He brushes Soap's arm, casting his gaze back to the floor, "I am sorry for that."

Soap cups his hand, "I know. But you can make it up to me. Come over."

"I thought you didn't want me sleeping on your couch."

"Long term. I don't think either of us are ready for that. But we had been rudely interrupted."

"That is true."

"And it's getting late."

"I thought you'd be more direct, Johnny."

"Well, I know how you are in public."

"Calling me shy?"

Soap shrugs, tapping the toe of his trainers against Ghost's. His brown

eyes sparkle, crinkling at the corners. Soap can only imagine the glowing smile underneath that mask, too genuine for the flirtatious tone between them. It's warm, stirring something deep in Soap's core.

"Never, Lt."

—

There are days we live that feel very much unreal. You walk through them unsure of your footing. Your limbs feel detached, as if they belong to someone else. You are very far away while a body that looks like you continues about doing things you could only dream of – your first kiss, graduating, riding a roller coaster – things like that.

This detachment is what overtakes Soap as soon as the two men leave the gym. The two walk along cracked pavement, sweat soaking into their jackets. Soap wears a smile as easily as a child, unbothered by anything. Ghost walks closely next to him, bumping his shoulder against Soap's.

It continues as they settle back into Soap's flat, dropping their bags in his living room. The words passed between them are a series of buzzes both waiting for the other shoe to drop or the moment to fully connect with Soap.

And it does.

It all comes crashing down the moment Soap steps into his bathroom and it slams down in a wave of flustered excitement. The mirror reflects back his cherry tomato red face and aching smile. His arms shake with excitement from having had a day with just him and Simon. Fuck how it came about because at least it happened.

Soap peels his sweaty shirt off. "Do you shower in that thing?" He calls into the living room.

"I'm more of a bath person."

"Filthy." Soap coos.

Ghost peaks his head into the bathroom and Soap pauses with his shirt tucked beneath his chin. He'd spent a lot of time staring at Ghost's bare skin whenever he could, he'd had more opportunities all and all, but now he's giving Ghost the chance.

Soap is thinner than Ghost, easy to be when he's as wide as he is. But after their night in bed together, Soap had learned how much of his

bulk had been healthy fat – more MMA fighter than bodybuilder.

"What can I say," He leans on the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, "I get tired of being on my feet all day." His eyes are narrow, voice low, which always does something to Soap. He couldn't name the feeling, only describe it. It's a fuzzy feeling – almost like butterflies in his stomach, but not quite. It begins in his stomach and travels to his face.

Soap tosses his shirt in the corner of the room, continuing to let Ghost look. With his back turned to him now, it's hard to say whether he takes the opportunity.

The shower sprays full force, misting Soap's face with cold water. It heats up after a few seconds. He holds his hand under the waterfall stream. Beads of water roll off his fingers and splash against the shower floor.

"You're wasting water, sergeant." Ghost's breath brushes past Soap's ear.

"Waiting for your ass to get in the shower."

Ghost presses his lips to Soap's bare shoulder. His mask scrapes against his clammy skin. Soap doesn't suppress the shudder that rips through him. He doesn't try to.

A second thought does hit him though. Ghost had dodged the question. Did he actually shower with the mask on?

Before he can think too hard about it, Ghost is wrapping his arms around Soap's chest, nuzzling his face into the crook of Soap's neck.

"Thought you didn't want me wasting water, Lt.?" He chokes out.

He feels Ghost's chuckle more than he hears it. Then Ghost's arms leave him and he's pushed into the shower, pants and all.

A bubble of semi-irritated laughter erupts from Soap, "*Tadger!*"

Ghost separates the two of them by closing the shower curtain.

Soap calls out as he strips out of his soaked joggers and boxers, "You gonna leave me all alone in here?"

"You're a big boy. You don't help cleaning off yourself."

"Will in a bit." He bites, embracing the freedom and the water on his skin. He tosses his wet clothes out of the shower, towards where he last heard Ghost's teasing voice.

They hit something nearby with a wet slap, followed by a grunt.

Bullseye.

"Now who's the filthy one, Johnny?"

Soap chuckles to himself, full of a giddiness, although missing the warmth Ghost could bring. He wants him in the shower, right behind him, pressed close together, hands chasing the flow of water on each other's bodies. He wants to see him in the light and be able to kiss every scar lurking there. To create a positive touch in places that had been so sorely abused. The urge to touch every bit of his face, just for the purpose of memorizing it, is astounding. It's breathtaking, literally.

He distracts himself by lathering his hair. If Ghost wasn't fixing to join him anytime soon, he wouldn't let the water run cold before he could actually shower.

Ghost shuffles around in the bathroom, but it's impossible to tell what exactly he's doing with the shower running.

The shampoo runs down Soap's face and chest, stinging where it touches his eyes. He dunks his entire head under the water and gently runs his fingers through his hair to help rinse the shampoo out. The water is deafening in his ears, like a crisp large waterfall.

Hands slide around his middle.

Soap jerks backwards before recognizing Simon's arm tattoo through his blurred vision.

"Steamin' bloody Jesus!"

Simon's hands loosen quickly and he steps back against the shower wall, "Didn't mean to spook you."

"No. I got that."

Simon reaches up and squeezes leftover shampoo from Soap's hair. He gently presses his fingers to the crown of Soap's head and rakes his rough fingers through then palms the base of his skull, letting the warm soapy water cascade down Soap's back.

Soap leans into it, willing Simon's chest to once again touch him. And it does as he reaches forwards and fills his palm with water and repeats the process. Once he's sufficiently satisfied, he brushes his fingers through the longer parts in the back. His blunt fingernails scratch at Soap's scalp ever so slightly, enough to make Soap never want to leave. He'd been so consumed with wanting to touch and talk to Simon, that he hadn't even considered how much he wanted Simon to touch him. Part of him wanted to get to the good part right now, recreate what happened in his bed only a few nights ago, but a larger part was enjoying this – this tender touching where Simon could do his own thing. It felt like being taken care of. It felt safe and secure. This moment was the most secure he'd felt in his relationship with Simon in months, both friendship and...whatever this was.

Simon squeezes the rest of the water from Soap's hair before sliding his hand to the side of his neck. It stays there, as if he isn't sure what to do next. Soap didn't care what he did next as long as it involved this skin on skin contact.

"Keep going." He murmurs, wanting the unique warmth Simon had to caress every bit of him, "I trust you."

It was a phrase he'd found himself repeating in recent months. And he meant it every time. Simon seemed to find assurance in those three simple words each time as well.

The larger man keeps his grip on Soap's neck, moving from the side to the front. His index finger and thumb come to rest on his jaw, the rest of his hand sits on Soap's throat. There's no way Simon doesn't feel his rapid pulse or the swallow he chokes down. Soap holds onto his arm, already weak in the knees. His chest hurts with anxious energy.

Simon's nose brushes against Soap's ear, cold compared to heat that comes off them. He's itching to turn around and press Simon against the wall, but his curiosity and general excitement keeps him rooted in place, begging Simon's other hand to roam lower.

His voice is a rumble in Soap's skull the next time Simon speaks.

"Say no whenever you need to." There is trepidation dripping from those words.

"I will."

Simon's grip tightens ever so slightly on Soap's neck. His other hand wraps around one of Soap's wrists, making him feel much smaller.

The water continues to rain down on them, primarily down Soap's front. It's hard to tell whether the water is getting cold or if Soap is getting hot, almost unbearably so.

Soap finally moves his arm, guiding Simon further down. Simon presses kisses along the side of his face, each one packed with startling electricity. Soap breathes shallow breaths through an open mouth. Simon's hand roams around his chest, pressing them closer together. Soap reaches back, digging his fingers into Simon's thigh. Simon's teeth scrape against his skin in retaliation. He wants that shit to scar. Wants Simon to leave a mark. Soap squeezes his thigh hard and pushes back against Simon until they both collide into the slippery wall. Simon grunts, a sound quickly cut off by Soap breaking free of his grasp and spinning towards him. He grabs onto his waist. His fingers dig easily into his fat, finding the hard muscle underneath. Soap finds Simon's lips again. They're chapped and warm from exercising in his mask and the steam in the bathroom. His stubble scratches Soap's skin as he presses his face against Simon's.

Soap steps back from Simon to finally look at him in the light. The small dot scars, like bug bites, cover his entire body, some more faded than others. They remind him of constellations, the way they're grouped together in some places. He didn't know any off the top of his head though. He runs his thumb over a cluster on his collar bone. Simon presses warm kisses to his forehead.

Another two scars just barely cross each other on his right side. One is small and jagged, as if it's from a poor patch up job as opposed to the original wound. The other mirrors the large jagged one on his back. Despite having to be years old, it's still red and raised. There are plenty of small scars too that could have been from anything.

What he isn't counting among them is the hand sized burned scar on his left side, the one he'd put there himself and his eyes always came back to. If they'd been better prepared, if Soap had been better, he could have properly packed it instead of cauterizing it like some action hero.

The kisses on his forehead stop as Simon catches on to Soap's newfound hesitation. He follows Soap's pained gaze to the tight red patch of destroyed skin.

Simon wraps his rough hand around Soap's hand and lays it flat against the burn mark. He presses his lips against Soap's ear. His voice vibrates throughout him as he speaks.

"You saved my life, Johnny." He lets his lips rest, almost as if kissing him again. "Don't forget that. So come on," He drops Soap's hand and instead gently holds his chin, making Soap look up at him, "cheer up."

Soap buries his face in Simon's neck, pressing his entire body up against him. To his surprise, Simon nips at Soap's shoulder, catching his skin with his teeth.

He pulls back again, hands cupping Soap's warming cheeks and the look in his eyes is indescribable.

"You're fucking beautiful, Johnny." There's a crack at the edge of his voice, "Just," he rubs his thumb across his cheekbone, "every part of you." His touches are so light now, as if Soap might break underneath them and given the last few days, he felt like he very much might, but not around Simon.

Soap runs his hands up to Simon's neck, feeling the thrum of his pulse underneath his thumbs. A flush blossoms under his touch, traveling down his chest and up to his cheeks. Soap expects Simon to look away as the colour in his skin deepens. But his brown eyes hold fast to his, shimmering almost. Soap pulls him closer.

"Think of me sufficiently cheered up," He says against Simon's neck, "Let's finish what we started."

—

Soap finds Simon in his bedroom after their shower has wrapped up. He's drying his hair absent-mindedly, fingering Soap's guitar.

"How long have you been playing?" He asks, his eyes never leaving the instrument.

"Not sure. A few years at least." Soap slides past him. While his towel is the only thing on him, Simon had already gotten dressed – grey army shirt that fits deliciously tight over his chest and joggers tucked into his socks. The sleeves of his shirt have small hopes dotted along the hem and the logo is faded.

"Are you any good?"

Simon's face is still damp, the towel hanging off his head like a cheap wig. The drops of water dotting his cheeks give him an almost wide-eyed naïve appearance, like some sort of fey creature instead of a man even with the stubble, scars, and wrinkles that showed his hard life.

"Depends who you ask."

"I'm asking you, Johnny."

Soap chuckles, turning towards his closet and pointedly ignoring the box of journals at his feet as he puts clothes on his cold body.

"Maybe I should play something for you. Let you form your own opinion."

"Humble." His voice is muffled.

Soap cranes his neck to see why and catches Ghost pulling a new balaclava on, doing that same head tilt he did the very first time Soap had seen his face. He blinks slowly.

Ghost is a very fast man on the battlefield, but having had a few more days to observe him in a calmer setting, Soap had noticed that he moves slowly in everyday actions. Every bit of muscle use is deliberate down to the twitching of his fingers against his thigh. The screen printed skull cracks as he readjusts the mask, making sure the hem isn't tucked into his shirt.

Soap is more than a little disappointed that his time looking at Simon's face is done.

Soap swallows, "What can I say? You give me a big head."

Ghost grimaces, "Interesting choice of words, Soap."

"Haud your weeshit." Soap "accidentally" punches his arm as he reaches for the guitar.

"You need some new material," Ghost steadies Soap with a hand on his naval, "I'm starting to understand your gibberish."

Soap ignores the heat in his stomach that blooms at the soft touch, as if he hadn't just been with him in the shower minutes ago.

"Fucker." Soap chuckles.

Ghost brushes Soap's cheek with his nose before falling onto the bed. His legs hang off the bed, "Show me what you've got, John Squire."

Soap lowers onto the bed, pressing his legs into Ghost's. There's a burning warmth between them.

Sitting on one leg and keeping the other firmly on the ground isn't the best position to play anything in. The softness of the bed makes him hunch and his foot is already going numb, but Ghost is right there. He couldn't pass up being right next to him as he lounges like a figure in a fucking painting. Both arms are draped across his chest and his eyes are cast towards the ceiling, studying the swirling patterns of white paint and the dust overhead.

Soap spends a few seconds tuning his guitar giving him an excuse to put off playing anything recognisable. He knew the chords and knew how to string a handful together to make a passable sound as well as a few small beginner songs, but nothing impressive, especially to someone who actually knew what they were doing. Whether Ghost fits into this latter category is a mystery.

He runs his hands softly across all the strings, filling the room with a delicate sound. Then strums a C, following it with a G, finding himself playing the [chorus](#) of a song he'd learned from simply searching "guitar chord" guides. He couldn't remember the name of it. He strums an F, ending the chorus with an A minor. It was far from a full song and only lasted a few seconds. Soap prays Ghost doesn't catch on to him playing this chorus on a loop, throwing in a few suspended chords to hide the repetition. It's lazy and unskilled, but there's also something relaxing about it, like drawing a pencil over a blank page, swirling it around until it's entirely filled with whimsical scribbles. Soap hums along with each note, feeling the sound vibrate in his throat and nose.

His posture is terrible, his playing simplistic, and the room quickly goes dark as the sun sets.

It's bliss.

He loses count of how many times he plays this single chorus, only stopping once his hand begins to ache. He leans over enough to carefully set his guitar on the floor then crawls over to lie next to Ghost.

Soap opens his mouth to speak to him when he notices Ghost's eyes are closed.

Soap props himself on his elbows to watch if he stirs.

Sure, his arms twitch, but otherwise, he's breathing softly. His nose whistles slightly with every exhale. His eyes flit around behind his closed eyelids while his pale eyelashes softly kiss the tops of cheeks.

Each one so delicate, it's difficult to believe they belong to such a man, and a real one at that. How were they not the creation of some long dead artist who looked into nothing and created beauty with their own divine hand? He knows that no matter how many times he drew Simon's face in the pages of his journals, it would never compare.

He walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in his aspect and his eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Whether Heaven to gaudy day denies

~ *Lord George Gordon Byron*

The poem comes to him easily looking at Simon. If he were awake, he would share it with him while holding onto his face aiming to keep that beauty and feeling contained in one place.

It's easier to give the words of others to those you admire because everyone who has ever loved has seemed to love so deeply that they took the words of past, present, and future leaving none for you. They ventured into the beauty of beholding their loved ones and found a way to describe the indescribable. They painted with endangered words saturating their paint brushes that they so delicately placed amongst the skin of the thief they held in their arms at night.

How did they do it? How, when what he felt for Simon was all consuming, did others like him manage to breathe long enough to tell the world of their love?

And how were they able to give it so freely to the world? Love feels so fragile, a gentle hope opposed to a violent force capable of toppling empires. It flutters around in a calming miasma only as long as you hold your breath and don't blow it away.

Soap's hand hovers over Ghost, desperately wanting to rub his head as he sleeps. If he could use words, he wanted to use the only thing he could give him.

Himself.

But the scar that peeks out from under Ghost's mask just under his eye reminds Soap why he hadn't given into his urges.

Ghost's leg jerks in his sleep, narrowly missing brushing against Soap's.

Soap steps out into the kitchen and flips on the overhead light. His back is stiff and his mouth is dry. He dribbles water down his chin as he practically inhales an entire glass of water.

The bedroom door clicks behind him.

He is partially obscured in shadow, his natural habit, it seemed, "How long was I asleep?"

Soap wipes his chin, succeeding in somehow spilling more water down his front. "Only a few minutes, I think."

Ghost scratches at his thigh, "I should probably go."

"Can I change your mind?"

Something akin to a smile flits across his face as he steps into the kitchen, "It's been a busy week. Mentally," He clarifies.

"You and me both."

"But it's also been good."

"Does that mean you're still coming over on Halloween? I bought candy."

Ghost leans against the counter. His eyes flick to the ground before settling on Soap. The look in them tells Soap his answer before his mouth does.

"That busy?"

Seeing Soap's silence as disappointment, he continues, "I'm not planning on going radio silent, again. I don't regret showing you that file."

Something in Soap knows that, but it doesn't help the spark of angry heat that flares in his chest. It must show on his face because Ghost shifts his weight to his other foot before speaking.

"I'm changing my answer to a maybe not a no. Halloween isn't a holiday I particularly enjoy celebrating."

"I get that." *I thought I would make it worth it*, he thinks. He doesn't say

that, he does change it to this, "But maybe it wouldn't suck so bad if you spent it with friends." There's still a hint of that anger, making the comment sharper than it needs to be.

Ghost's jaw slackens and Soap barrels on.

"I get that opening up was hard, but I'm not asking you to do that again. I'm asking you to spend time with your squad and have fun. Seems like a small ask in comparison."

"I didn't ask you to revolve your schedule around me."

"Actually you did. *A few days*, remember."

Ghost stares at his feet. That familiar guilt flashes in front of Soap, warning him to back off like it had so many times before. Be grateful that he's talking to you.

"You're angry." Ghost notes.

"Yeah. Yeah I am. I'll get over it." Soap dries his cup.

"You don't have to."

"No, I don't."

"But I'm not going to make promises I can't keep."

Soap stares at him, struggling with his emotions. They're not fair – emotions. For him, at least. So frequently they end up at odds with his critical thinking. Contrary to his parents' belief, he is a smart man. His intelligence had gotten him this far in life. That part of him is what fuels his guilt. He knows, if he'd lived the life Ghost had, he'd act similarly. You didn't just wake up one day and decide to get over things like that. If you could, Soap would have done it himself long ago and spared himself the nightmares and sleepless nights. He'd spare himself the stress lines and scars and early grey hairs. But he'd accepted long ago that these were things he could not change. Just like the easy way his anger flared, seemingly so easily and at the most inopportune of times. You shouldn't feel guilty for feeling *anything* and yet he did. Especially more often these days than ever before. Unlike the clean anger he had directed at Makarov, this was dirty and complicated.

"You're not the only one who's been through shit," Soap responds, voice low and gravelly, "You're not the only one who needs support."

We almost lost you, barely a month ago. I almost lost you. It fucking hurts for all of us, all the time. That's why we have each other."

"You sound like a greeting card." Ghost's words carry the hint of a smile.

Soap's scoff turns into a chuckle, "Cheeky bastard."

Ghost walks over to him with sure steps. Soap watches his sock-covered feet trek through the kitchen, not yet trusting himself to look in Ghost's eyes. His warm hand cups Soap's cheek, holding firmly. He slides his hand down to grip the back of Soap's neck and pulls him in close until their foreheads are touching. Soap leans into it.

"I like it when you use your words."

Soap pushes him away, half out of residual anger and half out of playfulness.

"Oh," Soap remembers something, "I still have your jacket. From a few days ago."

Before Ghost can say anything, he digs around his hamper, full of clothes he didn't have the energy to put away yet, and pulls out the black zip-up.

Ghost eyes him curiously as he returns, the rest of his expression unreadable.

Soap stands closer than necessary to hand it back.

He says this as Ghost grabs it, "I hope you change your mind. Give yourself the chance to make some new memories."

"I'll drink to your honour if I don't."

"I like the sound of that."

Ghost shrugs the jacket on. He catches Soap off guard as he kisses his forehead again, a hand on the side of his head, "I'll text you when I get home."

"Roger that, Lt."

Soap cleans up the water he managed to spill on the counter as Ghost finishes collecting his things and shoving them without thought into his ratty gym bag.

"We'll have to do that again." He blurts.

Ghost raises an eyebrow at him, slowly zipping the bag closed.

"The gym. It's been awhile since I've had a workout partner."

"Thought I told you I work alone, Johnny." He teases.

"Don't tell me you don't like having a partner. My experience tells me it makes things more fun. I've got a few examples on the tip of my tongue." He walks over to the couch where Ghost is.

Ghost doesn't roll his eyes. It's not his style. Instead, his head falls to the side, as if he had.

"Goodnight, Soap." He taps his shoulder before throwing his bag on his back.

Soap watches him leave with a lazy smile, still waiting for the dream to end. It had to at some point.

Chapter End Notes

Mmm, I just love writing intimacy

And thank you guys for the comments again :) I'm always here for them <3

be as you've always been (lover, be good to me)

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song Be by Hozier

Title Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Soap awoke in a dark hole, head throbbing. The snow hung around him – static from a television screen to match the buzzing in his ears. He rose to his feet, the world pulsating and shifting underneath him. Up is down, down is up. His hands weren't his own. He studied them with fingers shifting as if a mirage. They were covered in pen ink. Black lettering twists around each digit, trailing down his wrists, the ink dripping in thick black rivulets, growing thicker as it slid down to his elbows.

He stumbled forward until his foot hit something solid beneath him. Everything went in slow motion, blurred and ever shifting before him. Beneath his foot was a solid shape, submerged in the same ink that covered his arms. He plunged his hands into the inky darkness, following the clawing heated tug in his gut. He has to find whatever is down there. Whatever it was, it needed him.

His thrashing stirred the ink around, familiar crimson churning through the pen ink, splashing onto his face. It buried itself in his nose and choked him with copper. He ignored the slicing of metal through the skin of his hands as he continued to dig his hands into the pool beneath him. Don't stop. The blood was up to his biceps now and he still hadn't found whatever he stumbled on.

Then ice overtook him. Five strong cold digits latched onto his trembling forearm, squeezing tighter and tighter. The blood pool bubbled beneath him with gurgled breaths. Someone was drowning in it. Someone he knew and loved.

He dug his claws into the hands beneath him, skin searing against the cold. The liquid around him, still bubbling, began to steam, fogging the area around him. His vision vanished to nothing but a thick grey. Blind. He was blind and still fighting for purchase in the thickening pool. His hands were fire, burning a white in the center of his limited vision.

He was running out of air himself. Running out of time.

By some sheer luck, the pressure eased. He pulled and through squelching and strain, the person began to move upwards, toward the sky. The blood continued to stick to Soap's arm, not wanting to give up its prize. But the fog began to clear. The white fire chasing it away.

The blood pool was congealing into a brown one. The fire of his hands highlighted flecks of gold within its churning depths.

Out of the center, guided by his hand, came a head, then a body, dressed in military fatigues. They were stained with blood and ink. Soap moved his hands, pulling the body up and out onto solid ground, the pool receded, and they were left on solid rocky ground.

Simon lay in his arms, still and soiled. He wasn't the Simon he was used to, instead the one from the photo clipped to the front of his file. A teenager. Dead before he even started.

"Ghost." He shook his limp body, wiped the blood from his eyes, smearing the ink on his hand, spelling dates and moments of Soap's own life across the pale skin of his cold cheek. "Ghost."

He still didn't move. No breath entered his body. Soap continued to scrub, heat building in his hands, his cheeks, his nose, and eyes. Tears built, hanging from his lashes, threatening to spill onto the blue and dead skin of Simon.

"Come on, love." His voice cracked and doubled, echoing throughout the cavern before bouncing back to his ears. The last word, repeating and repeating. Never ceasing.

He dropped Simon to the ground and began pressing on his chest, forcing his life into Simon's. He begged the heart to beat, praying to it like a god. Each press broke bone and pumped blood, blood that refused to stay in the body, leaking out of the gashes in his arms, put there by Soap's own hands in a bid to save him.

His arms are sore when he wakes, the sound of crunching ribs still reverberating around his head, piercing his ears. Sweat glues his bedsheets to him. He raises a shaking hand, half expecting to see the pen ink still there. His skin is clean. But his mind isn't.

The red glare of his alarm clock informs him that it's three in the morning. The witching hour, his nan had informed him when he was a child. Her personal belief was that dreams that woke you up at three

am were bad omens of things to come.

Soap counts the seconds and watches the minutes creep by till his heart returns to a steady beat and until his breath returns to him.

Nightmares and panic attacks at three am on All Hallow's Eve? His nan would have loved this.

Soap pulls one of his pillows to his chest, warm and wet from his night sweats. He closes his eyes, imagining holding Ghost to his chest like he had a few days ago and imagining him breathing and safe.

31 October|Home|18:00:01|John MacTavish

The good thing about panic cleaning is that your house is clean. Even better is that he didn't have to do any prep like that for his party.

Still a weird concept to wrap his mind around. The only people who planned parties were children and rich people. Normal people had get togethers or whatever. It all amounted to the same thing. But calling it a party gave it an air of expectancy that Soap, after eight or so days, still hadn't figured out how to match. Even as he stands in his kitchen dumping various bags of candy into a bowl. The best thing he could come up with was to keep it casual. Maybe start with some music? Just background noise while everyone talked. Gaz had recently been on a date. They could bully him about that.

Nevermind, this party seemed awesome already.

Soap puts the bowl on his scuffed up coffee table where it looks strangely pathetic. The bright colours of the candy wrappers had a joy that just wasn't reflected in the water stains on the dark wood. The metal mixing bowl that he'd used once in his life also had a clinical edge to it like Halloween in a hospital. Halloween at the base wasn't even this sad looking. Some people made the effort to dress up, usually grease and ghillie suits used in lieu of costumes, but it was still something. The more festive superiors printed military-themed decorations that were oddly cute. Same thing happens around the other holidays. In his earlier career, he'd join by hanging up pictures of him, Melanie and friends he'd long fallen out of touch with. Some of them still dot the walls of his apartment in cheap plastic frames. They aren't the only photos he owns.

It's customary before or after a mission that everyone takes a photo together which means he has a collection of both physical and digital photos from every mission he's been on. He even has one from the

September mission, although that was taken on the plane ride home with Gaz's phone. He should hang more of them up, remind him that he has people. Give himself something to ground him like Ghost could.

He peels the wrapper off a piece of chocolate before grabbing his phone and looking for music. Would it be funny if he played Halloween music or would it be something he would never live down?

Fuck it. Something had to turn this party into a *Halloween* party.

He cues up a playlist of Halloween sounds and festive music. The first thing that comes from his phone speaker is a high-pitch poorly acted scream. If he opens his window he could probably hear similar screams from the street below. He does so now, knowing that once Gaz and Price got here, the small space would go from a comfortable temperature to hot. He opens the window, bugs be damned. He takes a moment to look at the street below. Some people are flitting around the pavement in fancy dress getting dinner before imbibing enough alcohol to kill an elephant. There are also groupings of tourists going on ghost tours. They weren't dressed up, making them stick out even more. Another giddy scream echoes throughout the street as a man drags a laughing woman behind him with their friends crowding around them.

Soap backs away from the window.

He's bored.

He'd entered *waiting mode* and there were no guns readily available to take apart and put together again. No demolitions to set up.

Soap slides into his bedroom, looking for his journals. After Ghost had left yesterday, Soap had moved them under his bed. Logically, he knew the information within them wasn't any safer under his bed than they had been in his closet. Moving them also didn't erase the fact that Makarov knew what was in at least a few of them. But it made him feel better not being able to see them from his bed. The closet door wasn't sufficient enough to keep that information from staring him in the face at night.

He slides the box out just enough to grab the journal on top then he kicks it back under.

Price and Gaz would arrive when they arrived. And Ghost...

Well Ghost would come if he wanted to.

God, he hoped he would come. He'd already fallen victim to checking his phone for new messages. Still the only one there was the one from last night.

Ghost: Home safe.

Soap hadn't responded for awhile, not sure what exactly to say before finally landing on a simple goodnight. It bothers him more than he wants it to only because recent events had told him there was nothing to worry about,

The couch groans under him. It still hadn't become accustomed to being used as frequently as it was. If it could think, it probably thought of itself as a piece of show furniture instead. But it's comfortable so it can complain all it wants. It can relax once he's back at work.

He pulls his knees up to act as a small desk and opens his journal. The last entry is from October 12th and it was long and sprawling. Reading it back now, it's clear Soap had been running off of hormones, stress, lack of sleep, and pain killers. The words are jumbled and all over the place, barely piecing together a coherent narrative of his time in the village with Ghost and in the hospital. An entire page was filled with question marks. Very Coherent, Soap.

He turns to a new page. They had come pre-yellowed, in order to give the impression of a well-worn journal perfect for the aspiring adventure. Soap wasn't an aspiring anything, he just needed something to get his thoughts out on. Simon had his paintings. Soap had this.

He begins scribbling circles and squares on the page with no intention of drawing anything. He then draws the pencil across the page in a loose shaky line that looks familiar. How did a line look familiar?

Because it belonged to someone. The page didn't reflect it, but above the line is a set of wide brown eyes that moved and spoke more than the man they belonged to. The line rests on a long crooked nose that is rounded on the end. And that line turns white whenever his cheeks flush. Soap fills in these details to the best of his ability, rounding them off with his high cheekbones and uneven lips. He draws Ghost's hair lighter than it is, wanting to reflect its softness more than anything.

A knock at the door interrupts his starry-eyed staring.

Soap shoves the pencil in the journal before hiding it under the couch. Just because the rest of the team knew about them didn't mean they needed to see what was in them. They'd be buried with him before he let that happen.

Price greets him with a bag in his face. He holds the plastic carrier up, "B.Y.O.B."

Once inside he pulls out a six-pack of beers and sets them on the table where they clink together and immediately create water rings as they drip with condensation. He spots the candy and grabs one with an orange wrapper.

Thankfully, he finishes chewing before speaking, "First one here?"

"Seems so. Means you get your pick of the drinks."

Price nods before grabbing a beer from the pack, tossing it to Soap then grabbing one for himself.

Soap settles in next to him on the couch.

"So," Price sips from his beer, "How are you doing after yesterday?"

"Good. Ghost helped me clear my head."

"Makarov'll get what's coming for him."

"I'll drink to that." Price and Soap tap their drinks together.

Another knock.

"Come in." Soap chugs some more of the beer. It's cheap, that much is clear from the simple logo on the front. But cheap didn't always equal bad. It's sweet and tingles as it goes down. The end has a tart note that Soap would never be able to identify. The only thing that betrays its cheapness is how thin it is. It'd obviously been watered down in order to make more out of less ingredients. Still good though.

Gaz comes in with two bags in toe and a pair of cat ears on his head.

"Look what the cat dragged in." Price snorts over the lip of his bottle.

"Very funny." Gaz kicks the door closed behind him, "Ntombi insisted when she heard I was heading here."

"You two have another date?" Soap tosses Gaz his own beer once he free his hands.

Gaz collapses on the same chair he'd fallen asleep in days ago, "Yes. We went out for drinks with some friends of hers."

"So you're pissed already?"

"It takes more than a few pre-dinner drinks to count me out, Captain."

To prove his point, Gaz pulls out another two six packs of beers from the first bag and a bottle of umber liquid. The label is turned away from Soap.

"I've brought these to add to the pile under the assumption that Soap had the poor selection he had last time."

Soap doesn't dignify this with a response.

Gaz looks around, collecting his drink once again, "Ghost coming?"

Price looks at Soap. He's surprisingly better than Ghost at hiding his meaning. He could be concerned, knowing it's a touchy subject. He could be curious, wondering the same thing. Soap can't be sure.

"He had some errands." He doesn't exactly answer the question. Did this mean that he wasn't coming? Did it mean he was and that he was going to be late?

Deep down, Soap knows by the heavy rock in his stomach that Ghost isn't coming. His composed air in his flat last night had been more or less a front. In two days he'd not only aired his secrets in full for Soap to see but had also gained a reason to worry about Soap's safety.

Still, at Gaz's question, he checks his phone. There's just two messages, one from Price and one from Gaz telling him they were here. Nothing from Ghost.

Soap sucks down the rest of his drinks in the hopes it'll dissolve the weight in his stomach.

Gaz shrugs, "So, what's the deal?"

Soap heart leaps into his throat but despite this, his voice is level when he next speaks, "Deal with what?"

Gaz motions around the room with his drink, "What are we doing?"

Not that I'm complaining about just sitting in silence."

"You're the one who can't go five minutes without talking." Price says as he studies the bookshelves.

"That's patently untrue, Captain."

"I have movies," Soap nods towards the same bookshelf Price is currently looking at, "and there's this shit." He leans over and pulls the metal candy bowl closer to the edge of the table.

"Happy Halloween." Gaz grabs a pink wrapped candy and studies the front and back. He then digs around for more of the same kind.

"Got anything scary?"

"Help yourself." Soap pulls another bottle from the box Price has brought.

Gaz also grabs another bottle after pocketing his new collection of candy. Then he sets off for the bookshelf and grabs a handful without looking at them, balancing the beer bottle in one hand and the movies in the other. He dumps the collection onto the coffee table and begins to sort through them. Some get his nod of approval while others get a grimace he doesn't try to hide. He gets up two more times to grab more movies and those too are sorted into piles.

The pile he keeps closest to him are horror or thriller movies. These are the ones he spreads out and flips to their backs. He studies each one as he nurses his drink.

Soap checks his phone again. Still no message from Ghost, no sign that he was coming despite Soap wishing to every divine being that may exist. He feels like a fool, sitting on his couch waiting for his friend to come to his party. What doesn't help is that he's pouting. He can't help but slump with a frown on his face. The others pretend they don't notice, Gaz in particular. He's still looking through the measly selection of horror movies, trying to find one to watch. Price eats another piece of candy. Unlike Gaz, who doesn't look at Soap, Price's eyes keep flicking towards him.

Soap straightens his posture just to get Price to stop looking at him. He's fine. He really is. Disappointed, yes but also still somehow holding onto hope. Ghost had spent the last few days surprising Soap. Maybe this would be just another surprise.

Or maybe he needed another drink.

He grabs a handful of the colourful candy and dumps it in his lap.

“Just pick something, Gaz. You aren’t disarming a bomb.”

Gaz looks as if he’s about to say something snarky but thinks better of it. He levels his eyes with Price. “Yes, sir.” He grabs something that Soap doesn’t see the cover of before Gaz is loading it into Soap’s ancient DVD player.

“This better be good, Gaz.”

“What?” Gaz spins towards him, “You’re the one who told me to hurry up! Besides, they’re Soap’s movies. If it’s bad, it’s his fault.”

Soap digs around the end table for the remote to both the television and the DVD player. He tosses both and Gaz catches them on the way back to his seat, fully prepared to dig into his candy collection and finish off a new beer. As the company logos begin to play and artificially eerie music fills the space, Soap begins to settle. He would focus on the movie and the candy before him. He had a life before Ghost and this weird obsession he could only partly get over by giving into it. Now he would live that life with Price and Gaz.

Although Gaz had found the movie in Soap’s flat, the story is entirely new to him which makes it easier to get into despite the generic slasher plot. It had probably been an impulse purchase from some bargain bin after a night of heavy drinking. The effects aren’t realistic, nor are they artistic, but they get the job done in a fun way that Soap buys into it. Everyone does. A few of the poorly made jumpscare even get Price who resettles with a glare on his face pointed at anyone who notices.

“Your couch is shite, Soap.” He grumbles.

Soap slurps loudly at his third beer.

“I fucking called it.” Gaz says once the killer is revealed.

“Was that before or after the fifth time you jumped out of your seat?” Soap asks.

“I’m prepared, Soap. Ready at any moment. It’s what makes me good at my job.”

Soap tosses another piece of candy at him.

“Shut it, both of you.” Price’s eyes are glued to the screen as the killer reveals their motives.

Despite the look that the sergeants share, they do as they’re told and finish the movie in relative silence. He’d forgotten to shut off the Halloween music so anytime the movie got anywhere near quiet, a shrill scream or a ghost howling would play quietly which probably wasn’t helping the “scary” movie’s tone. The credits roll, blood red text on a blinding white screen.

Immediately, Gaz is back on the floor searching through the other movies he’d deemed passable for that night’s viewing. The credits backlight him and that combined with his hunched posture and the cat ears still affixed to his head gives him an ominous look.

“I’m going to grab some stronger drinks,” Soap collects the empty bottles from the coffee table. The candy wrappers would have to wait until later because the three had gone through a lot of it over the course of the two hour movie. He comes back with the whiskey and new bottle of tequila. It wasn’t of as high quality as the bottle Alejandro and Rudy had sent him, but it would do. He also takes the time to finally examine the other bottle Gaz had brought.

It’s a brandy madewith cherries and apricots, going off the illustrations on the label. It looked expensive or at least high quality. This stuff required a good tumbler and not just a plastic cup. Soap sets off for a set of those when there’s a thump from the hallway. He freezes but after a few seconds is ready to write it off as a neighbor being noisy.

But then the thump turns into a knock. A single sharp one on his door. The other men in the apartment look up but with wildly different expressions.

Price looks intrigued.

Fucking obviously. Price had been one to bring Ghost back to the UK after he’d been arrested in Mexico. He’d been the one to throw out every detail of Ghost’s past which meant he knew what had happened on Halloween barely a handful of years ago.

Gaz on the other hand has a more neutral expression, like *aren’t you going to get that?*

Soap walks unsteadily towards the door. Upon closer inspection, he can see the shadows of two legs blocking the light coming from underneath the door. The handle is cold as he grasps it. He isn't sure whether he can open it, not wanting to face the disappointment of it not being Ghost on the other side. But with Price and Gaz watching him, and someone obviously waiting on the other side, he can't just ignore it. He would have to buck up and that was something he could do. The room goes silent, the movie credits having ended. It seemed as if the movie itself sensed what was going on in Soap's mind.

He finally opens the door, not bothering to look through the peephole.

Simon stares back at him. Not Ghost. He's not wearing his mask – instead he's wearing sweatpants tucked into his boots. They look a bit small for him and have white patches worn into the knees. His hair is wet, like he'd just gotten out of the shower.

"Sorry I'm late." He mumbles.

"Not late at all," Soap says breathlessly, "We're just picking out a movie."

The corner of Simon's lip twitches, "You're staring, MacTavish."

Soap grabs him by his shoulders and pulls him into a bone crushing hug. His hands are knotted into fists like if he applied enough force, Simon and he could become one. Barely a second passes before Simon's arms settle around him, his chin nestling into Soap's shoulder. Soap doesn't care that Gaz and Price are watching them.

A voice clears behind them, "Didn't think I'd see you again."

Price is standing right behind them. Soap hadn't heard him get up. Both Price and Gaz were staring.

Simon nudges Soap away to better look at Price. "Halloween is when all the ghosts come out."

"Guess so." Price shifts forward, as if he were going to pull Simon into his own hug, but decides against it. He crosses his arms

Soap is still holding onto Simon's arm, feeling his muscles tensing with each prolonged second. Soap mirrors Price and steps aside to give Simon some space.

Gaz coughs and returns back to the television.

"I, uh," Soap scratches the back of his neck, "Thought you'd changed your mind about coming, L.t.?"

"Did you?" Simon slides his eyes to him, his face still turned towards Price. When he was wearing the mask, the look wasn't as...odd? Was that the right word?

"Well, after yesterday..."

Simon rolls his eyes, the corner of his lip twitching upwards.

Price raises an eyebrow, "What happened yesterday?"

"Nothing." They answer in tandem.

"Gaz!" Simon calls over, a bit too loud for the small space, "Sit-rep." He joins him over by the coffee table. His crouching form is huge compared to Gaz's more lithe figure.

Price bumps Soap's shoulder, "I told you."

"Told me what?"

He smirks and joins the others.

The next movie is significantly better. Could Soap tell you the plot? No, but everyone is together. It feels right, passing beers and candy around between the four of them.

Simon always has his hand on the back of his neck, rubbing or searching for the mask that should be there. Soap wants to pull it down and hold it. Price knew there was something between the two of them. Gaz had to suspect. But even for Soap, being that public isn't something he wants yet himself. He just got Simon to himself, taking his hand now, or anywhere in public was an invitation to share him with anyone.

He would have to settle for his thigh against Simon's, their shoulders touching. He would have to settle for the times their hands touch when sharing food and drink between them.

The second movie comes to a close. Price stands with a groan, eyes darting to each of his men just daring them to comment. No one offers him an "old man" or "codger" even though the challenge almost proves too much for Soap.

Price pulls his phone from his pocket, as if checking the time, but then

a light flashes on it, directly at Gaz's face.

He blinks and rubs his eyes, "What the fuck was that?"

"Photo op." He flips his phone around, showing Gaz a photo of him hunched over the coffee table, movies and candy wrappers scattered around him. The camera had caught him mid-blink, blinded by the flash.

"Come on, up and on the couch Gaz."

Gaz blinks once, "Why?"

"Customary, Gaz."

"At work. We're not at work."

"We're celebrating you sad lot surviving a month of civilian life." Gaz doesn't move from the floor, "Get on the couch, Kyle. Please?"

Gaz sighs, making his way over to the couch while dodging Price, setting his phone up to take the picture. He takes a half-full beer bottle and leans his phone against it, camera pointed at the couch. Simon slides off the couch, eyes glued to the camera in front of him. A solid hand on his shoulder courtesy of Price keeps him from going any further. The back of his neck flushes as he settles on the ground. He continues to stare directly at the camera but his hands keep moving, rolling his sleeve up and down, dragging his blunt nails across his tattoo until the skin underneath turns white. Soap sinks down to the ground next to him, sliding his hand into Simon's, stilling his movements. His eyes remain forward and focused, but Simon accepts his hand, linking their fingers together and holding Soap in his clammy palm. The flush continues to travel up Simon's jaw, blossoming in his cheeks. This man was full of life. Soap squeezes his hand, grounding Simon to him more than anything else. He couldn't, *wouldn't*, let himself fall back into that pit of doubt. That doubt would get him killed in the field. Would get *Simon* killed in the field. Soap wants to hold Simon's heart in his hands and protect it with every bit of his strength, like he'd done for him in Las Almas.

Behind them, Gaz and Price shove themselves on the couch, Gaz grumbling the entire way and swatting at the older man as he adjusts the cat ears still sitting atop his head.

The phone begins to beep, the timer counting down. The pressure from Simon's grip loosens but he doesn't let go of Soap's hand. Soap

smiles gently to himself, feeling his own cheeks go red with a prickling warmth. There'd be no getting rid of it before the camera went off. He isn't sure he wants it to.

He broadens his smile, bringing it to something more cocky and confident, definitely showing off too many of his teeth.

The flash goes off, blinding Soap with pure white. Then he blinks a few times to clear his vision. Simon's hand leaves his, followed by the absence of his presence entirely. When Soap can see again, Simon is situated in Gaz's previous seat. He tilts towards the TV, one leg draped over the chair's armrest and his hands buried within his pockets.

Soap clears his throat, reaching for his glass and drinking down the rest of his beer.

Heat creeps into his ears as he finishes and he lets his gaze drift back towards Simon.

The man is staring at him, a smile teasing his lips. Soap tips the empty bottle at him, coaxing the smile fully out. Soap thinks he even sees a bit of tooth. He'd take it. He'd take every bit of Simon he could get.

Price taps out after the third movie. Gaz two more after that, with the rest of the candy, claiming it for his siblings.

Simon gathers the remains of candy wrappers while Soap puts away the DVDs. They'd watched all the ones with horror or Halloween themes. The music continues to play through Soap's phone. It has to be on its last legs, having played music all night. No one had complained about it though, even when it had looped.

A few bottles clink together as Simon adds that to the growing pile of garbage in his arms.

"You don't have to do that."

"I don't have to do anything."

"Has anyone told you how stubborn you are?" Soap straightens, looking straight at Simon.

His mouth hangs slightly agape, showing off the creases in his dry and chapped lips. Wearing the mask as often as he did was obviously doing some damage. How he could stand that, Soap didn't know.

"From my experience, Soap, you're the stubborn one. You went toe to toe with a tank."

"And I won that battle, with Rudy's help." He points at Simon with one of the empty beer bottles in his hand, heat rising to his face at the challenge, his mouth moving faster than his brain to defend himself, "And I have to be stubborn if I'm going to love your distant ass."

They both stop, what Soap said hitting them both.

Simon's mouth closes. Even from across the room, Soap hears the grinding of his teeth, sees the strain in the flexing of his jaw.

Soap's own heart hammers in his chest. It'd help if he could stop staring at Simon. Where was that damned mask when he needed it?

Simon drops his gaze, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. Then he vanishes into the kitchen with his bundle of garbage. Soap can do nothing but follow and deal with his own armful of trash. He'd rinse out the beer bottles, shove them in the recycling and pretend he hadn't used that single word. He wasn't even sure if he meant it. What did anyone mean by anything these days? Words upon words upon words. Think drunk thoughts over this. Any drunk thought would be better. Oh god, he was going to throw up. *C4, thermite, blasting cap, time fuse, shock cap. C4, thermite, blasting cap-*

Hot water washes over his hand, spilling out of the beer bottle. He drops it with a help, "shit!" Soap rubs it. Where was he? *Blasting-*

"You're not alone."

Simon's voice pulls him from his thoughts. Soap turns to find him staring directly at him with his large brown eyes. The sink water continues to run, filling the silence like a waterfall. A ghost wails from the music playing on his phone.

"If you don't want to use the *words* to say it, that's okay. *I* don't want to say them, yet." Simon takes both of Soap's hands in his, holding them tightly between them, "It's okay."

"What if I was ready?" There he goes again, speaking before thinking, "What if I did want to say them?"
"Then say them."

"You're not going to run away?"

“No. Because we’re a team.”

“Friends?”

Simon brings Soap’s hands to his lips, caressing his knuckles softly.

“Worse.”

Soap breaks free of Simon’s hands, moving to hold his cheeks. Red instantly blooms beneath his touch, traveling to his nose. He pulls him close, kissing him for the first time that night. Normally, he closes his eyes during these moments in order to memorize every sensation – the cracks on Simon’s lips, the dryness of the tip of his nose, the tug in Soap’s gut, and the pleasant warm aggressive beating of his heart, the same beating he felt from Simon’s when they pressed their chests close together – but this time he lets his eyes stay open, drinking the other man in and running his thumb across his cheekbones. The grown out stubble pricks at the skin of his palms. He likes the longer facial hair on him. Simon’s eyes are closed, showing off the pink skin around his eyes. Then they flutter open as he pulls back. They’re still nose to nose, breathing in the same sweet air.

“Are you going to say it?”

“No. I’m going to save them, because we’re worse than friends. And we have all the time in the world.” He whispers, not quite sure whether or not his words hold true. It’s more of a prayer.

Simon pulls back further, a quizzical look on his face.

“Are you disappointed?” Soap’s hands begin to slip, hovering just around his neck.

He smiles, showing the slightest hint of white teeth, “No. The opposite.”

That may be what does it. Soap’s eyes begin to burn, his throat constricting and the feeling of vomiting coming back in full force. He digs his fingers into Simon’s shoulders, desperately trying to steady himself.

“Johnny?”

Soap forces a smile, even as the first tear rolls down his cheek. “Sorry,” his voice cracks and goes silent before he can explain himself.

Simon pulls him into his chest, wrapping his strong arms around him and a single hand resting at the base of his skull. Still, Soap attempts to hold back the tidal wave. Holding onto him would make it worse, so his hands hang around him as he chokes. He would not cry like some teenager over his parents. He was an adult. He'd learned long ago that sometimes parents are shit and it's better to pay them no mind as soon as you're out of the house. But they were all he had, even if they thought he was a fucking idiot.

Soap chokes out a barely contained sob straight into Simon's shoulder, not trusting himself right now to hold him. He had him. He wasn't disappointed, never seemed to be, not in him. When would that go away? When would he mess it all up?

Would it be when Simon finally felt the wet spot he's leaving in his jacket? Soap inhales the wet fibers.

"I don't want to be alone again." He hiccups, tired arms finally falling to his sides.

"Nobody does."

"I don't want to say it because I -"

"I'm not leaving you. Whether you say it now, later, or never."

Soap bites the inside of his cheek, drawing blood and swallowing it down with the newest wave of tears. He twists his hands into the thick fabric of his jacket, pulling him closer.

"What if I never say it?"

"I could never be disappointed in you, Johnny. Anyone who is, isn't worth a fraction of you."

The wave comes crashing through with a choked laugh, muffled by Simon's shoulder. He begins to rock the two of them, squeezing his chest even tighter. Soap's breathing gets stiff under his touch, but it's comforting in a way, knowing someone could have this effect on him and keep him feeling safe. Safety and pride, radiating off of him in warm waves.

Simon begins to shake against him too, a wet spot begins to grow on Soap's own shoulder. But then he chuckles wetly, "I'm so fucking stressed right now."

Soap can't help the laugh that rips through him, "Me too."

Simon snuffles with more laughter, "Only we could find being home stressful."

"No," Soap shakes his head, "No, the 141 is my home. *You* are my home." He says, shamelessly wiping tears and snot on on his jacket.

"That's really fucking sad, Soap."

"Pot. Kettle."

"Shut up." He pulls Soap's face back to him, burying him under swathes of kisses across his tear stained cheeks. Both their eyes are red and swollen, far from attractive. Soap returns the kisses when he can, trying to catch Simon's lips before he drags them away and across the other side of his face.

His words reverberate inside Soap's head. *You're not alone*. Did he really say that for Soap or was he consoling himself? It didn't really matter. He repeats the words. *Not alone*.

Soap drags him to his bedroom, only a few feet behind them.

Simon plants his feet, leaning back and observing Soap with bloodshot eyes. He stops in his tracks.

"I want to do this right, Johnny." He slides his hands down Soap's arms, once again holding both his hands. He opens his mouth, parting those perfect chapped lips.

"Get lunch with me then. Tomorrow." Soap interjects. "Lunch."

"Lunch." He repeats, "I know a place."

"So..."

"I'm not sleeping with you tonight," He presses a kiss to Soap's forehead, "I need to start making you work for it."

Soap laughs, another tear falling down his cheek. Simon catches it with his hand.

"We both have problems. Don't we?"

"So many. I couldn't begin to count."

"I'm starting to think your's are worse than mine."

Soap just pulls his stupid perfect face back down to his.

Happy Halloween.

Chapter End Notes

this was originally going to be where i ended this, but a comment inspired me to write a bit (a lot) more to fill in more of their *six* month leave.

i love the way the world throws us moments

Chapter Notes

*This chapter title comes from the song Moonlight Densetsu by DALI
(translation and cover by LeeandLie)*

[Title Playlist](#)

Is it Christmas time? No. Well is it Valentine's Day? Also, no. Look, I have a schedule I keep. But I did finish writing this on Valentine's Day if that means anything AND I started it before Christmas.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

24 December|Cemetery|12:20:45| Simon Riley

He's going to be late. He knows he is, but this is something he needs to do.

He hadn't been here for years. The place had grown since his last visit, but he still remembers the path. The winter snow had built up considerably over the last few days, just in time for Christmas. A blanket of white to hide all the death underneath. A clean, fresh sheet. And like the many things in his life, he mars it with just his presence, boots scuffing along and leaving muddy scars in the winter landscape.

Johnny wouldn't want you thinking like that.

Well, Johnny isn't here. He would be if Ghost had asked. He's annoying like that. Had been since they met. He was the first person who'd gotten him to roll his eyes within seconds of meeting them. And in a professional setting no less. What had also been annoying was the feeling that sparked in him because of a simple friendly gesture. Isolation was something he wore as easily as his mask and Johnny "Soap" MacTavish had come along and ripped it off him. Then picked him up and dumped him into a friendship. Friendship is something he deftly avoids because despite pretending otherwise, he cared easily. People and things become his responsibility the moment he lays eyes on him. Friends made those responsibilities and care permanent. He didn't need Soap to tell him all that, contrary to the sergeant's personal belief.

The sky has the audacity to be blue at a time like this. This city only had so many good days to spare and it chose a day like this. The sky had to be bright so he could see clearly the evidence of his own failures in the form of a single headstone, names nestled together like the names on Santa's naughty or nice list.

Ghost crouches in front of it, brushing off the snow. It isn't as thick as he expected, like someone cared enough to keep it clean. The stone is polished and slick. In the right light, it might even reflect things like a mirror.

He'd been here one time before, shortly after Price pulled his ass out of Mexico. The dirt had been freshly piled and the headstone freshly engraved. Ghost had no say in it. Didn't even get to attend the funeral, but the newspapers said it was a "beautiful send off to beautiful lives." That's only because his father's name had been kept off of it. Apparently that had been a stipulation in his mother's will. She wanted to be buried in this cemetery and if his father was even remotely in the same place, her next of kin would sue everyone involved. Ghost had cut Price off when he tried to tell him the final resting place of that bastard. He didn't care where that fuck was buried, if he had been buried at all.

He prods the engraved letters with gloved fingers. He'd worn his entire ensemble today – the gloves, the mask, the grease paint – just like he had last time.

The mask only came off for Soap. He was the only one who could see Simon. Even Ghost couldn't. Sad as that was, but small steps into a safe situation were better than large ones into danger. Halloween had been the exception. The entire Tube ride had been a nightmare. People stared at the scars on his face, then looked ashamed when he caught their eyes. It isn't even the scars he minds. It's everything underneath. It's being known and pitied.

Ghost swallows, digging his fingers into the grooves of each letter, stopping at the dates of death.

The snow crunches behind him. Ghost reaches for the knife stashed in his boot, but stops short of drawing it.

It's just an old man wearing a blue jumpsuit and a winter coat. He drags a bucket behind him filled with sticks and a shovel tossed over his shoulder.

"Sorry 'bout that." He chuckles, "Should've announced myself." His

eyes widen, taken aback by the skull mask. Then he sees what Ghost had been looking at.

His gaze softens, "Ah, them a sorry lot. I've always said a man's time is when he's old."

Ghost cocks his head to the side, "Really?"

"Yeah. Youngest there was less than five. Everyone thought his uncle did it till it came out in the news that that wasn't the case. Seemed sketchy. Smelled of the government."

"Why do you say that?" He stands.

"You know the type, traumatized army vet. People thought it was a cover up."

"Do you?"

He shakes his head, "Not my place. What's dead is done." He hangs his head in what has to be a prayer, then looks at Ghost's tired eyes and heavy stance, "Sorry, hope I didn't ruin your Christmas. I've always had a bit of a morbid streak."

Ghost hums in the back of his throat.

"You visiting someone?"

Ghost lies, "My grandfather."

"God rest his soul." He pats Ghost's arm and walks away, picking up sticks and dead flowers as well as fixing fresh flower arrangements that had fallen over. He should have brought some. It'd be a hollow gesture, but a gesture none-the-less. It would have been better than staring at his family's final resting place wearing a mask. Soap had put it best, like he did with seemingly everything, it was suffocating. It's still comforting in day-to-day life. When he's not staying with Soap, he's wearing the mask. He'd been betrayed by so many people – Vernon, Graves, Shepherd – but the worst betrayer among them was himself. He'd abandoned them in life and now he'd abandoned them in death.

Once the groundskeeper is gone and he's sure he's alone, Ghost settles into the snow. It instantly soaks the knees of his jeans. He bundles his mask in his hands.

"I'm home now." Simon says. He itches to leave the mask there and truly move on. That's what a healthy person would do. He wasn't there yet. He's big enough to accept that. But it's that thought that hangs at the end that's different. A year ago, he wouldn't be trying to reclaim his own identity. He didn't leave Simon Riley behind because he wanted to, because Simon had a family and while his life sucked for a considerable amount of time, he still had good memories that Ghost didn't want to give up, but he had to in order to get rid of the rest.

Instead he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a set of dog tags on a burnt and rusted steel chain. He runs his thumb over the grooves in the flat metal, some of the words having been worn away with time. Others having been forever stained a burnt umber from blood that had settled into it and dried many years ago. *Simon Riley* is embossed on the first tag while the others had his blood type and regiment, 22nd Special Air Services. His original tags, one of the many things Price had "gifted" him back before the formation of the 141. He had been content to lose them in the fire that he'd set, never needing or wanting to see them again. Price handed him the tags and he had shoved them in his pocket where they had burned cold against his skin. After that, they moved around his flat, his own beating tell tale heart.

He digs his fingers into the frozen earth at the base of the headstone, going through a layer of new snow, grass, and then finally dirt. He's not digging anything substantial, just a small divot, not even enough to be considered a hole. He carefully piles the dirt next to the headstone before placing the dog tags name down in the earth.

He wasn't burying Simon again, just...trying to move on. This had to be a start. It felt right, at least.

Ghost tugs his mask back on, shutting out the cold and shutting out the feelings that threatened him every year. He needs to leave. Soap would hunt him down if he missed Christmas with the 141 and Ghost isn't sure if he'd survive that or not.

He doesn't bother knocking as he practically lived in the place for the last month. He wasn't sure when that started, but if he was sleeping at his own place, so was Soap. A drawer in each other's place kind of situation, something he never thought would happen to him.

Gaz had arrived in the short time Ghost was gone. He currently leans against the island counter, chopping carrots straight into a bowl. His head twitches towards the door as it opens, "You get the celery?"

Ghost holds up a bag.

“Good. Get chopping.”

He pulls the bundle of slightly-wilted celery out of the wet bag and drops it onto the counter. Gaz slides the bowl in between them.

“Where’s Soap?”

Gaz points at the bathroom with his knife, “Cut his finger on something.” Then he raises an eyebrow, “You gonna go help him?”

“He’s a big boy.” Ghost grabs a knife from a block on the counter and begins slicing the celery into small bits.

“Interesting.”

“You have something you want to say, Garrick?”

“Oh, no sir.” He smirks.

"I thought Ntombi was coming."

"I'm picking her up once dinner is in the oven. I don't want to scare her off."

“Shouldn’t bring her in that case.”

Gaz leans away from him, eyebrow raised, “Are you taking the piss right now?”

Ghost brings the knife down with a heavy hand, staring at Gaz.

That’s the scene Soap’s walks in on. Gaz, not looking terrified per se, but extremely apprehensive and Ghost holding a heavy kitchen knife.

“Looks like Christmas already.” He says, “Just missing someone’s cat on fire.”

“Have either of you lived normal lives?” Gaz asks incredulously. He looks at both of them, seemingly remembering that Ghost wears a mask all hours of the day and Soap chose *that* mohawk as his preferred haircut “Right.”

Soap runs his fingers through his hair before turning to his oven and checking the ham inside. That had been a surprise. Ghost had woken up with a start from a nightmare and when his hand instinctively

went for Johnny, he came up with nothing but empty sheets. This didn't alarm him as much as he thought it would. But Soap had taken it upon himself, quite impulsively, to go out and buy a single ham the size of a small child.

That small child still looked raw in the oven. Soap closes the oven again and looks back to the scene between Ghost and Gaz. The former lowers his knife, staring at Soap, forgetting the task at hand. Johnny had and continues to have that effect on him. It's the blue of his eyes and the way they light with every single emotion he has and how he feels them so strongly and unashamedly. Price had told Ghost he had a terrible poker face, but Soap's had to be worse. Every time Ghost pissed him off, he could see Soap working through it, chewing the inside of his cheek before deciding whether to snap at him or be supportive. Or the way he could never hold back a crooked grin, even in a serious moment. He'd purse his already thin lips into an even thinner line and glare at the nearest person, listening intently, but Ghost could see it.

And he wouldn't change that in a heartbeat.

Price arrives conveniently after the food prep is finished. All that is left is for Soap to finish bringing everything together, navigating the various pots and pans covering his tiny stove. Loose hairs are glued to his forehead with sweat as steam and heat pour forth.

"Sergeant, if you keep opening the door, your ham is going to be dry."

"I know what I'm doing, Ghost." He growls, shutting the oven door once again and pointedly, not looking at him.

"Where's Ntombi?" Price asks.

Gaz grumbles into his beer bottle, polishing off what was left. Without fully answering the captain, he grabs his coat from the back of the couch and slinks out the door.

"Everyone is grouchy."

Ghost bites back the comment sitting on the tip of his tongue and replaces it with something more professional, "He's getting her now. What about your guests?"

He pats the laptop under his arm, "I'll be calling them as soon as we're done with dinner."

Something pops and bubbles from the stove, causing Johnny to curse under his breath and pull a smoking pot from the burner.

“Smells fantastic, Soap.”

“Fuck you, L.t.”

“Fine cooking not treating you as kindly as demolition?”

“It’s wonderful, Price. I’ve never been better. Never been fucking better.” He hisses, scraping something out the pot and into his bin before setting the offending pot back on the stove.

Price chuckles to himself as he clears space on the counter for his laptop. Then he turns to Ghost with a look he recognizes all too well. He needs an escape plan. Being trained in infiltration, he was equally skilled in exfiltration too. Initiate plan.

“I’d like to talk.”

Ghost can’t help the widening of his eyes. He’d said it and backing out now would just ensure the lecture was worse and more personal. He bites his tongue, forever thankful for his mask.

He takes the lack of bolting on Ghost’s part as a sign to continue.

Price pulls him into the living room.

“How are you? This is the first time you’ve celebrated Christmas in what, five years?”

“This is just any other day, Price. I’m drinking with my team and having dinner, then I’m going home.”

“That’s bullshit.” Price hisses, “I made you my lieutenant for a reason and I expect you to be honest with me. So when I ask you a question, answer it.”

“I did answer you. Today is like Any. Other. Day. And like you said, it’s been five years.”

“Five years doesn’t erase something like that.”

“Need help, Soap?” He stares Price down.

“No!” He pauses and something sizzles loudly, filling the space with a stronger smell of smoke. “...Yes.”

Ghost storms off, tamping down the stabbing pains tearing at his throat and tamping down on his anger. How could he fucking ask that? He's smarter than that. At least he thought he was. People surprised him everyday.

Price's eyes burn into his back, even as he busies himself stirring mashed potatoes at Soap's direction. He'd pay for this later. With a snap of his fingers, Price could have him out of work and back in a psychiatrist's office until the day the sun exploded. He blinks, the image of a freshly snowed-on headstone flashing across his eyes.

"Hey!" Soap grabs the spoon out of hand, pulling the pan off the stove, "Are you trying to set my house on fire?"

"Setting fires is your job."

"Seems like it's yours today." He hands the pot back, "Scoop these into a bowl then stick some extra salt and butter in there."

Damn it, Price. Smoke still lingers around the kitchen from the earlier mishaps. Kitchen smoke smells different, tastes different than the smoke from a house fire. If untended, it would get there. Petrol also changed the smell of fire. Ghost's tongue is thick with it as he stirs a melting slab of butter into the slightly burnt potatoes. The yellow melts into a rick gold, turning the cream coloured mash into a swirl of warmth, steam rising up into Ghost's face. Garlic burns his eyelids from one of the many pots still left on the stove. Mix and mix.

His heart rate settles just in time for Soap to hand him another pot with a finished side. This had a thick red sauce in it with swollen and split cranberries. Ghost spoons this into a different dish, inhaling the scent. Positive associations. Make them. He'd read about them in one of the many self-help books he'd never finished.

Cranberry sauce and Christmas with Soap beside him.

Gun smoke with being at the firing range with Price. Fighting side by side with his team.

"Gaz better be back because this shit will cool fast."

"You sound like an old woman." Price comments. He'd been silent since Ghost stormed off, but his eyes had continued to burn into him in little sharp pin pricks.

Soap grumbles, flinging a dirty pan in the sink, joining the mounting

pile of dishes that Ghost would end up doing after everyone left.

Ghost hears the clicking of the door handle before it opens, followed by strained laughter. Gaz's voice comes next, "Anyone's cat on fire yet?"

"No." Price sips from his newly opened beer, "But the night is still young."

"Shame," says a husky voice, with a slight shake to it, "Kyle had promised me burning cat."

Ntombi, the girl from the bar two months ago, walks towards the kitchen with a bright pink coat hanging over her arm. The first time they'd seen each other, she had a large afro, now it is shaved, cropped close to her head with wave patterns cut into the sides.

Gaz holds onto her hand, "Some refreshers. That's Soap back there, mumbling over the food. That's Price and that's Ghost. We also call him L.t."

"You still haven't told me how you all got your nicknames. Soap is an interesting choice and so is Price."

"Price is his real name."

The man tips his drink towards her, "You can call me John if it makes you feel more comfortable."

"Soap's not your real name, is it?" She asks with wide eyes, burying her hands in her coat.

"No."

She sighs and Gaz leans over, "His name is also, John."

"Funny coming from a man named *Kyle*." Soap pulls the ham from the oven and slams it on the counter, the hot pan inches from Price's outstretched hand.

"He's usually friendlier than this." Price holds his hand out towards her, partially protecting himself from the wrath of Soap's cooking. Ntombi takes it, her eyes returning to a normal non-saucer size.

Ghost settles for a friendly half-wave over a handshake.

"Well, introductions have been made. Let's get eating and skip straight

to the part where we all get drunk and say awkward things.”

“I don’t need to be drunk to do that, Gaz.” Price guides Ntombi to the couch, “Did he tell you about the first time he fell out of a helicopter?”

“You fell out of a helicopter?”

“Twice.”

Soap shoves a serving bowl and a stack of plates in Ghost’s hand, “Take this to the coffee table.”

It is going to be a very long night.

Soap enlists Ghost’s help passing out plates and telling people to serve themselves, all while Price continues to tell Ntombi about the various vehicles Gaz has been thrown from. Gaz, meanwhile, begins to fill a plate for her, interrupting Price’s story with questions. She answers them quickly, barely pulling her focus away.

She accepts her plate, "And you weren't injured either time?"

"When I have a job to do, I get it done."

"You weren't kidding when you said your job got interesting."

"Nah. That's everyday stuff for us. Ntombi programs medical robots."

"I'm training to program medical robots. There's a difference, Kyle."

"Well it makes you the smartest one here," Soap jokes, settling down with his own plate, piled up high with a little of everything – mashed potatoes, freshly made stuffing, ham, cranberry sauce – just to name a few. He'd been busy all day, probably hiding from his own holiday-based issues. He wouldn't pester him about it.

"May I ask why you aren't spending Christmas Eve with your family?" Price manages to navigate speaking with his mouth full while also not coming off as an ass.

"We always celebrate Christmas Day. It makes it easier on some people so I'm free today. What about you guys?"

"Celebrated earlier today then going in for round two tomorrow morning," Gaz offers.

"My parents are in Scotland, my sister in America, and flights are expensive. 'Specially around the holidays."

"I've never been to Scotland." Ntombi interrupts before it comes to Ghost's turn. He says a silent prayer to the various Christmas ghosts Dickens had conjured up all those years ago. With luck, he wouldn't be visited by any of them.

"It's the same as any other place. It snows. It rains. It's green." He caps off his sentence with a bite of ham and potatoes.

Ntombi's own plate lies abandoned in her lap, "But there's so much history! And castles!"

"There's castles everywhere if you know where to look." Soap grumbles behind his beer.

Ntombi's cheeks colour, sensing she may have made Soap uncomfortable, so she swallows and turns to Gaz, beginning to chew on her empty fork. Soap, meanwhile, looks between the two of them then to Simon, his drink still held to his lips.

"But the castles are nice. Visited them a lot when I was stressed."

"That's nice."

Price adds some more ham to his plate, somehow still engaged in the conversation that had quickly come to a halt, "Tell us more about your work. How'd you get into it?"

She breathes a sigh of relief, "Well I wanted to be a doctor. I even studied pre-med, but then my girlfriend cheated on me and I realized I didn't actually *want* to be a doctor, but I still loved medicine. I loved the field." She continues on, getting more animated, slipping into details about medicine and surgery that Ghost is only tangentially familiar with, only because he'd gone under the knife more times than he cared to admit. A coolness washes over him, relaxing his muscles as Ntombi speaks. She's passionate and happy about something he'd only seen as painful. Also helping is the look Gaz gives her. The corner of his lip is tilted upwards as he watches her speak. He's leaning forward, as if this were the first time he was hearing any of this. Ntombi was a lucky one, alright.

Ghost finally lifts his mask and begins to pick at his food, everyone settled around him.

Till Soap curses under his breath, "Forgot the fucking pie."

Before anyone can question what he means, he tosses his empty plate onto the coffee table and leaps over the back of his chair. Conversation falters and all eyes fall on him as he all but sprints into the kitchen and shoves his hand in the freezer. He tosses a frozen pie on the counter.

“Everyone good to wait a few hours for this to thaw?” He rubs the back of his neck, staring at the rock in front of him.

“I’m good as long as you have drinks.” Price raises his drink, tilting it towards Soap in the kitchen.

Soap continues to grumble, cursing at himself even as he lowers himself back in his seat. A chuckle rumbles from Ghost’s throat, earning himself a glare that he can’t be entirely sure isn’t genuine.

Everyone crowds in the kitchen to help clean up, much to Soap’s dismay. The kitchen is very small for five people moving around. Eventually, Soap kicks everyone out, Ghost included. He shoves the half thawed pie in Price’s hand with a mumbled order to open it. He delegates this to Gaz as he sets his laptop up on the kitchen counter. The motions are familiar and Ghost watches from his chair as the captain pulls up a video chat, connecting two separate people. They’d discussed this beforehand. It is an unprofessional use of professional equipment, but it’s the holidays and while Ghost would prefer to be hiding under his blankets, many others actually enjoyed them, so people actually got together. The first person to connect is Laswell, with a woman Ghost vaguely remembers meeting one or twice at her side. Kate is wearing a loud Christmas sweater, probably the most juvenile thing he’s seen her wear. The green wool and brightly coloured baubles are a far cry from the neutral blouses. The other woman (he still couldn’t remember her name) had put silver, red, and green beads in her box braids. She’s already downing a chute of champagne as Laswell and Price work on connecting the sound. The next connects with sound, but grainy footage showing a single man dressed in fatigues. There’s cheering and laughing on his end then the picture clears. Again, it is someone Ghost doesn’t remember the name of, though not for a lack of trying.

The sound on Laswell’s end picks up before getting interrupted by someone Ghost does recognize.

Alejandro leans into the camera, shooing away the soldier that had been there previously with a smile and a wave.

“*Feliz navidad, hermanos!*” He blows a noise maker directly at the camera. “Kate, good to see you and Naomi again.”

Soap’s head whips up from his place at the sink. He cheers, “Vaqueros!”

He sticks his head in the camera, blocking Ghost’s view, “Where’s Rudy?”

“Right here.” Comes Rodolfo’s voice.

“Get your ugly mug out of the camera, Soap,” Alejandro teases, “I want to see everyone.”

Ghost rises from his chair, ignoring the heavy pit that had formed in his stomach – a hard little ball made of his anxieties and the food he’s forced down. Christmas isn’t the enemy. Family isn’t the enemy. *This is family*. He’s not going to lose them.

Think of the odds? The odds had screwed him over before, but that doesn’t mean they always would.

Ghost hand shakes, a precursor to what he knows is coming next – the rapid breathing, the racing heart and thoughts. His brain already threatens to go a million miles an hour.

He touches Johnny’s shoulder, using him to steady himself. He waves to Alejandro then excuses himself to the bedroom.

He wouldn’t break down. He’d made it this far. Your hand couldn’t shake in the field, it throws off your aim. Picture the rifle sight. Picture the target settled down range and turn that shake of the fingers into a pulling of the trigger. He thinks, too late, that he should have pictured the black and white paper targets that litter training courses, but he can’t stop the image of a blond man, his head exploding out in a mist of red. The name burns on the tip of his tongue, accompanying the burning of rising bile in the back of his throat, placed there by the hammering of his heart.

Ghost pushes off the door and grabs one of the orange prescription bottles from his bag as well as a days old water bottle. The movements are familiar. He doesn’t even have to look at his hands as he dumps a single white pill into his hand and washes it down with water. It would take a few minutes to work. He could spare that, as long as he sits straight up. Nausea teases at him, desperately trying to convince his mind and heart that the sickness racking his body is something

tangible, something that could be expelled. Sitting up would help, so he leans back against the bed, legs outstretched in front of him, drinking in the dark. He forces his eyes open, reminding himself of where he actually is and he attempts to conjure up jokes but every time he begins one, whispering it to himself out loud, his thoughts veer wildly back to any and every problem it can find on hand – Christmas, the anxiety attack itself, the others standing just outside the bedroom most definitely noticing his prolonged absence.

And what about the cemetery caretaker? He definitely had to know who Simon was the moment he saw him. He shouldn't have gone. It's a stupid gesture anyway.

Maybe he should just throw up and get it over with. He'd feel better. It would work faster than this stupid little pill that his therapist had shoved onto him. How was something smaller than the tip of his finger supposed to solve all his problems? There's so many that his stupid fucking brain can't even keep them straight. It can't even decide which one to focus on.

Wrong thought. Wrong thought. Wrong thought Wrong thoughtwrong thought wrongthought.

He stretches out even more. The muscles of his chest are too tight. Too heavy. That's why he couldn't breathe. If he could just slice down the middle, trace a line down his sternum, and make room, he could breathe again. His nose and teeth could stop buzzing. If only everything could stop fucking *buzzing*. He scratches the skin of his collar bone, then his neck, chasing the buzz away with his blunt fingernails and heat.

Then a yawn rips through him, followed by a clawing thirst. He sucks down the room temperature water, focusing on nothing but that bitter water as he chokes it down. Some of it dribbles down his chin.

The door opens and Ghost scrambles to wipe the water from his face.

Peeking inside the room is Gaz, face unamused and focused in on Ghost, sitting splayed out on the floor.

"You solid, mate?" He doesn't wait for an answer before sliding into the room and closing the door behind him. Thankfully, he doesn't turn on the lights. Ghost tracks his movements as he sits on the edge of the bed, inches away from Ghost.

"Are you a scrooge or something?"

“A regular Ebenezer.”

Gaz laughs.

His relationship with Gaz is...complicated. He's a good man. A good soldier. But they aren't particularly close, probably the most professional relationship in the 141.

“We're planning on toasting.”

Ghost hums. He feels more than sees Gaz's hand hovering over his shoulder. He isn't sure whether he wants Gaz to take that step and physically comfort him. He decides to save him from the choice.

"Price told me what you did," He says.

Gaz freezes, his hand frozen between them, "What did I do?"

"Back in September. Told me it was you who dragged my ass out of the dirt."

He clears his throat, "Yeah well, you would have done the same."

He would have, but never expects it. Expecting it is asking for disappointment. It's asking to be left in a hole in the ground. You have to appreciate the good ones when they come by. Ghost had been lucky enough to not get one, but three, Gaz being one.

"He also told me you took over chest compressions. Saved my life."

Gaz looks away, his cheeks darkening. He mumbles something into the dark. When it's clear that Ghost isn't leaving, he speaks a bit more openly.

"The other guy wasn't doing it right."

"No doubt."

"But it's no problem. What will be a problem is if we make Price wait any longer to toast." He stands and holds his hand out to him.

Ghost's heart still beats uncomfortably fast, but he's breathing. He would crash earlier than he would like, something Soap would notice, but it's better than the panic. He takes Gaz's hand, suppressing a laugh at Gaz's face as he struggles with Ghost's weight.

“Why are you so fucking tall?” He grumbles.

"It's the weed I smoked as a teenager." He throws the comment over his shoulder.

Gaz chokes, "*What?* You fucking serious?"

He turns back to him with a hand on the door handle, "No one will believe you."

Soap's handing him a drink the moment he sees him. In the few minutes he'd been gone, more people had joined the festivities. The entire screen on *Los Vaqueros*' side is filled with soldiers, many of them clearly drunk. One of them is shoving a headband with reindeer antlers onto Rodolfo's head. He tries to push them off but Alejandro is holding his arms down. Ntombi cheers them on, not even looking as she pulls Gaz into her side.

"Took you long enough," Price opens a new drink. Ghost chews the inside of his cheek, preparing for the inevitable conversation Price would pull him aside for. You would think Ghost would have rehearsed an answer at this point.

Ghost pops the bottle cap off on the side of the counter. Soap sidles next to him. The space is crowded with everyone trying to be seen by the small laptop camera. It's the same on Alejandro and Rodolfo's side with *Los Vaqueros* waving hands in the camera whenever they can. The only ones not having these problems are Kate and Naomi, though the first one seems to be battling with something trying to jump its way onto her lap. It's Naomi that relents and picks up a very fat orange tabby wearing a red Christmas sweater. The cat immediately begins to rub its head against the hard side of the desk, purring loudly enough for the microphone to pick it up.

"Everyone here?" Price jokes.

"Let's get started," Kate grabs a green bottle from off screen. The champagne had already been opened and she uses it to fill Naomi's empty glass and tops of her own.

Soap's hand snakes into Ghost's, just like it had on Halloween, like it does whenever Soap gets close to him. And just like every other time, Ghost squeezes it, to show him it's appreciated. They're close enough that no one could possibly see it. The last thing he needed was Price and Laswell getting him in trouble for being with a subordinate. Especially at Christmas time.

"To the end of this shitty year," Laswell holds her glass up.

"To the start of a better one," Naomi places a chaste kiss on Kate's cheek.

Alejandro raises his drink towards the camera before sweeping it around behind him, "To *mis hermanos*, new and old."

Rodolfo picks his own drink up, "To the fight and the brothers that fight alongside us. Forever and always." He looks up to Alejandro standing next to him.

Soap goes next, squeezing Ghost's hand again, "To the start of something new."

"To not falling out of helicopters," Ntombi jokes, "and trying something new."

Gaz grumbles unintelligibly until Ntombi nudges him. He clears his throat and raises his drink, "To saving people."

Price looks at Ghost. They're the last to go. Price then lowers his glass, making it clear that he won't be going next.

Soap squeezes his hand again.

"To teammates." His voice is deep, coming out as more of a growl, "and building something from nothing."

Price smiles, finally tearing his gaze away from Ghost and raising his glass once again, "To family, the one we chose. Cheers."

Price leans over to turn the volume down as the sound of clinking takes over. Ghost reaches over, making sure to touch glasses with everyone present. As he leans past Soap, his lips brush against Ghost's ear, "To making it through the night." He whispers.

"Down sergeant."

Soap bites back a smirk, cheeks turning red.

Ntombi pulls a deck of cards from her bag and everyone takes turns playing various games. At one point, Ghost and Gaz had been scripted into holding a hand in front of the laptop so *Los Vaqueros* and the Laswells could play. Ntombi's presence is probably the only reason it doesn't devolve into a curse-filled brawl. Soap looks like he's about to throw a punch at Price the fourth time he loses, completely throwing ranks and relationships out the window. Ghost shoves another slice of

partially frozen pie in his face to prevent bloodshed. He switches with Ghost, chewing angrily as Ghost quickly wins back money Soap lost. The concern that Price had shown him earlier vanishes with every hand. They start betting drinks instead. When you lose a round, you take a shot. This change tested everyone's gag reflexes.

To be honest, Ghost hadn't drunk this much since he was a teenager. Where the others were starting to look buzzed with pink brushing across their cheeks, Ghost was getting dizzy. He still hadn't quite fought off the nausea from his meds either. The combination gives him a leg bounce he can't shake.

His father had gotten this way just before the combination of alcohol and pills in his system made him pass out in his own vomit on the living room floor. Ghost squeezes his fists, digging his nails into his palms.

Someone bumps his foot. He looks up to Soap's bright smile, cheeks and nose tinged pink. He slides a water bottle towards him.

Gaz and Ntombi leave around one in the morning, followed by those online. Price takes his sweet time getting ready to leave. His eyes burn into the back of Ghost's skull. Soap looks between the two of them, chewing on his lip. He excuses himself to the bathroom, leaving the two of them alone.

"Are you feeling alright?" Price asks.

No, he thinks. "I'm getting real tired of people asking me that."

"Is that the best answer I could hope for?"

"Yes, because I don't need you to be my father, Price." He turns towards the older man, "I need you to be my captain. My boss."

Price zips up his coat with a snap of his wrist, "What do you think I'm doing here, Ghost? It is my job to ask you these things. It's my job to watch out for my men, especially when they're hurting."

"We're always hurting, Price. I'm not special."

"Do you think I only ask you these things? You're just the only one who thinks he's above answering. So as your captain, answer the question. Honestly."

Ghost shoves his bouncing leg under him, trying to hide any other

signs of weakness. “Tired. Nauseated. Drunk.”

“Been a long time since you’ve been that last one.”

Ghost brings the water bottle back to his lips. He still hadn’t chased away the dry thirst in his throat.

“Is that going to be a problem?” Price asks.

“I’m not sure yet.”

Price’s hand settles on his shoulder, pushing him down into his chair, “Call me in the morning. Sleep well, Simon.”

“You too, Captain.”

Soap conveniently exits the bathroom as soon as Price leaves, drying his hands on his pants. He settles down on the couch, kicking his feet up on the table. “I need to stop having people over. This is exhausting.”

“Starting to see the appeal of working alone?”

Soap closes his eyes and reaches outwards with his hands and a pout on his face. He continues to beckon him over. Ghost complies, practically crawling over to the couch and burying Soap within his arms. His weighted blanket is still at his flat, so Soap would have to do. He hides his face in Soap’s neck, smelling sweat, beer, and the scents of everything he’d cooked that day.

“You’re touchy tonight.” He observes.

“I’m tired. It’s late.” Ghost mumbles.

“You slept in and barely helped, how can you be tired?” But Soap wraps his arms around Ghost’s, kissing his forearm. After a few minutes like that, Johnny wriggles out of his grasp, leaving him alone. He digs under the couch.

“I got you something,” Soap hands him a crudely wrapped object. There are snowmen on the paper and with a marker, someone had drawn little skulls on their charcoal faces.

“We said no gifts.” Ghost leans forward.

“Someone once told me I have a ‘healthy disrespect for authority’. This is that.”

“And if I don’t open this?”

“Think you can live with the curiosity?” Soap puts his feet back on the coffee table, leaning into Ghost’s side. He sighs, flipping the gift over in his hands. It’s wide and about an inch thick. The sides are hard, but the top of the gift bows inwards when he touches it. There are no tags on it.

He hooks his finger under one of the folds and tears. He’s greeted with a solid black picture frame. Inside is the photo they’d taken at Halloween – the four of them around Soap’s couch, Price and Gaz sitting on it while Soap and Ghost kneel on the floor. Soap’s crooked smile lights up the entire picture, drawing anyone’s eyes to him and his stupid wonderful mohawk. He remembers the warmth that radiated off of him when they took it. Ghost would have happily faded into the background, letting Soap take all the light, but he hadn’t let him. He’d wrapped his arm tightly around Simon’s shoulder. He knew his smile had been stiff, something quite visible in the photo, but he didn’t realize how happy he looked. His brows had been pinched and his smile small, but his eyes lit up. He almost didn’t recognize it as himself. There was no grease paint, no mask, just a man. He also didn’t remember leaning into Soap’s side or Gaz’s arm on his shoulder. Ghost swallows, his eyes getting misty.

“That’s how we see you.” Soap curls into his side. “Also your flat is pretty sparse and fucking depressing as a result. So hang it up or I will.”

Ghost takes his mask off, laying it on top of the photo before setting them both on the coffee table. Then Simon wraps his arms around Soap and places a kiss on that stupid mohawk of his.

“Oh, I will. Just to remember how unfortunate you look.”

Normally, Soap would respond with some sweet Scottish nonsense that usually amounted to cussing him out. Now, he kicks his legs off the coffee table to practically sit on Ghost’s lap, snuggling in close underneath his chin. He’s humming, like a cat purring at his owner’s attention. Ghost shifts his position to better accommodate Soap, wrapping a stabilizing hand around his thigh, the other still cradling his head to his collarbone. He brushes his lips against the barely exposed skin underneath Ghost’s shirt collar.

“You’re flushing,” He murmurs.

“I like it better when you’re not talking.”

He kisses the skin there once before resting his head back down.

“You make me feel safe,” He says, “I don’t know how I ever survived without you.”

“Because you’re strong, Johnny.” He presses a kiss to his head, hiding his blushing face in Soap’s mohawk. It still carries the scent of his shampoo, lavender. Soap said he bought it because he preferred the brand and the scent didn’t matter. It does to Ghost. Lavender is calming and he wears it well. Ghost inhales it, letting the hairs tickle his nose.

Soap continues to hum. His eyes are closed and for a moment, Ghost thinks he’s asleep. He shifts to carry him to bed, wrapping his arm tighter around his knees and moving to grab his shoulder. The humming stops so Ghost does as well. His eyes flutter open.

“I’m visiting my parents in a few weeks,” He says, voice groggy.

“Hmmpf.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“I thought you didn’t like your parents.”

Soap leans back with furrowed brows, “I love my parents. Our relationship is just...complicated.”

“It doesn’t need to be.”

Soap rolls his eyes before crawling out of his lap. Ghost already misses the warmth, especially since Soap is right next to him. He crumples the remains of the wrapping paper into a tight ball. Ghost reaches out and grabs his thigh, begging him to stay put, a gesture only allowed by his drunken state.

“I’m not going to drop them just because they piss me off. I don’t have many people in my life-”

“You have me.”

“I know.” Soap snaps. He rubs his eyes, staring down at his feet, “But it doesn’t mean I want to lose them. I don’t like losing people. So, I try. I visit and I make an effort because I’m stubborn and stupid like that.”

“If you weren’t stubborn, you wouldn’t have me.” He brushes his hand

across Soap's jaw, warmth blooming in his gut as he leans into it, even as his brows are knit together, hanging heavy over his bright blue eyes.

"I'll go with you."

Soap sighs, lying back down with his head back in his lap. Ghost cards his fingers through Soap's mohawk. It needed trimmed again, a job he'd been happy to take over. He loves holding Soap's head in his hands, reminding him that he's real and alive. This wasn't a waking dream, like he'd had many years ago.

Soap rubs his knee, "You did it."

"Did what?"

"Made it through Christmas Eve. Mission complete."

"Teamwork, Johnny. And I've made it through plenty of Christmases."

"I thought you didn't do teamwork."

Ghost kisses his head again, keeping his lips pressed against his scalp, "Haud yer weeshit."

Soap rolls over, stealing a kiss on the lips and trapping his head in his hands, "I like it when you talk dirty." His kisses along Simon's jaw then comes back to his lips, prodding them with his tongue.

Simon pulls back enough to speak, holding down Soap and keeping him from chasing him, "I don't see any mistletoe."

"I do."

He lets himself get pulled back down into another kiss, Johnny chasing the tastes of his mouth. Simon obliges, gripping his hair.

Until another yawn interrupts them, courtesy of Simon. Soap rubs his back, chuckling as he turns his face away.

"Your meds hitting you particularly hard?"

"I'm fine." He yawns again, this time against Johnny's mouth.

He brushes his hand behind Simon's ear, trailing it down his neck. Simon winces as his rough fingers irritate the scratches there.

“You should get some sleep.” He’s more careful this time, moving his hand away from his neck and moving to caress his cheek, dancing his fingers across Simon’s scars. Each touch warms Simon, like a good cup of tea on a cold fall night. Another reason he could never bring himself to hate the scars on his face. Johnny loved them. He loved touching them and he loved being touched there.

“What if I miss Santa?” He jokes in between kisses to the side of Soap’s head, stopping at the tip of his ear. Soap wriggles in his arms, turning his head to allow better access.

Simon picks him up bridal style, suppressing another yawn. He’d be happy today. Happy.

They collapse onto Soap’s bed, pushing their way up to the pillows. Darkness creeps at the edge of Simon’s vision, framing Johnny’s beautiful eyes in a vignette. Simon’s hand swims through his languid vision, brushing his pinky across the warmth of Johnny’s cheek, bringing it down to his shoulder. He can’t stop blinking, losing Johnny’s visage in pitch black every few seconds. Soap rolls off the bed and begins digging around the floor. Simon pats the bed, begging him back.

“Here, Simon.” He pulls Simon into a sitting position, his fingers crawling around him. His limbs are heavy in his hands, “Sure you don’t want to sleep in jeans.”

“Maybe I do.”

Soap leans into him, resting his chin on his shoulder, pulling his shirt and sweatshirt over his head in one go. He presses a kiss to the top of his shoulder blade before placing a cool new shirt over his head. Simon lifts his arm, helping Soap guide him through the arm holes. Soap rewards him with a quick kiss on the lips.

He helps his tired form to the edge of the bed and begins working at his pants.

“You’re going to owe me tomorrow.”

Simon bites back another yawn, kicking off his jeans and grabbing the shorts Soap offers in exchange. “What for?”

As he’s bent over, blindly slipping his legs into his shorts, Soap presses his face into Simon’s hair. He hadn’t cut it in a few months, so his face is lost, but his words aren’t.”

“I got you a Christmas present. I put a lot of thought into it.”

Simon pushes him back, pulling his shorts up all the way, “We’ll see.”

Johnny whines in the back of his throat, pushing him onto the bed. Simon curls onto his side with a chuckle, listening as Johnny stumbles around in the dark, changing into his own nightclothes then wincing as he crawls over him to his side of the bed, pulling the covers over them. Simon pulls him close, finally letting his eyes rest once Johnny’s cheek is pressed to his chest. He takes a few deep breaths, the deepest he’s taken in hours. Arms snake around him until they’re locked at the small of his back.

“Your arm is going to get numb if you keep it there.” He mumbles into Soap’s forehead.

“Does it look like I give a fuck?” He lets out a shaky breath, then, “Wake me if you need anything.”

“Johnny-”

“Wake me. End of discussion.” He digs his nose into Simon’s sternum, shutting down the conversation.

“I will.” He gives him one more kiss, “Good night, love.”

Chapter End Notes

Thus ends part one.

Thus begins part two.

I have no idea how long this will be or if you guys even care about the domesticity anymore, but I've committed too many hours to change course now.

i am the son and heir of nothing in particular

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song How Soon Is Now by Love Spit Love (originally by The Smiths)

cw: recreational drug use (it's just weed but I like to be safe)

Title Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

5th January 2024|Suburb in Dundee, Scotland|13:12:06|John MacTavish|Simon Riley

Soap clenches and unclenches his fists, standing in front of the door to his parents' new home. He hadn't been to it before and even from just outside, it's nice, perfect for their image. He'd told Simon a little bit about his relationship with his parents – his mother and father were into poems and that he felt they were disappointed in him, especially compared to his sister's success. He did not tell him that he *knew* they were disappointed.

Ghost finishes grabbing his backpack from the back of their rental car and joins him by the door.

"You alright?" He grabs onto the strap of Soap's pack and tightens it as if they were out in the field.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Ghost gives him the side-eye, but doesn't push it. That wouldn't last if he didn't knock on the solid brown door of the precious two-storey. There's a wooden engraved sign on the front that says 'MacTavish' in a curly font. Another sign hangs on it with the help of black metal rings with the house number on it. He knocks twice, with a long pause between the two. There's a pause before a dog barks on the other side of the door. When did they get a dog? Someone shushes it.

Ghost adjusts his mask – he'd opted for the balaclava from Mexico as

well as the grease-paint. It took some favors and workarounds at the airport, workarounds that wouldn't work with his parents.

The door is opened by his mother, a short woman with greying black hair. Her infinity scarf is striped blue and silver, perfect for the New Year, and her beige sweater is tucked into her straight-legged lounge pants.

"John," she smiles stiffly. It's posed and she's not very good at it. Her eye twitches when she sees his mohawk, "Welcome home." She continues sweetly. She pulls him into a sort of side hug, but she's no longer focused on Soap. No, she'd caught on to the boogeyman behind him. She should see him in uniform. A golden lab sticks its head out the door, panting and tongue lolling about. It sniffs at Soap's knees before bolting at Ghost. It jumps up in an effort to bury its head in his hands. Simon squints as he removes his gloves to scratch the happy pooch's wiggling head.

His mom whistles, "Oliver. Inside." Her eyes are locked on Simon. Oliver licks his hand before bounding over to Soap, sniffing his boots. His mother grabs onto his collar and pushes him behind her.

"Who's uh, who's your friend, John?" Her eyes are so wide that Soap can see solid white around her blue irises.

"He goes by Ghost." She didn't get to know his real name. Not until she stopped staring at him like that.

"Unique." She squeaks. She looks around, like she's afraid of neighbours seeing Soap and Ghost. They didn't fit the image she wanted to project, "We were just about to sit down to lunch. Why don't you two come inside?" She bats Soap into the house and is about to do the same thing to Ghost but freezes as he comes closer. He's a full foot and a half taller than her and wearing all black. She brushes a strand of her long black hair out of her face.

The house is even nicer on the inside, very modern American. The entry opens directly into a fully beige living room. A gallery wall surrounds a large television that his parents definitely didn't need. A lot of the photos are of his parents on various vacations as well as the obligatory child photos. One of the largest is of him and Melanie sitting in a sandbox, he'd just lost his first tooth and looked like he'd just won the lottery. Melanie looked ready to cry, holding the tooth in her tiny hand. Soap smiles. It's a shame Melanie couldn't make it home for the holidays. She'd make the entire thing better. Even with

the constant comparisons. . The newest photo of Soap is from Melanie's secondary-school graduation. They didn't hang up the one from his enlistment. He'd figured they'd at least have that. There are some photos he's never seen before. All of them are of Melanie and a man Soap doesn't recognize

Oliver bumps his nose against Soap's hands.

Ghost stands out like a smudge of dirt on white shirt. His thumbs are looped through his backpack straps.

"You can just drop those in the entry...Ghost," His mother gives him a wide berth, "Then I'll show you to the guest room after lunch."

Ghost looks at Soap with an unreadable expression. Soap shrugs.

"Diane, who is it?

"It's John. And he brought a friend."

"Let's see her then." His father steps into the living room from an arch on the east side. He smiles broadly enough to show off his bright white teeth. Like his mother, his father's eyes lock onto Ghost. His face tightens, his version of a faltering smile. He crosses the room to pull Soap into a hug, "Still no girlfriend then?" He laughs. With an arm locked around Soap, he holds a hand out towards Ghost.

"Nice to meet you young man. Matthew."

Ghost sizes him up, taking in his father's sweater and the button down underneath. His eyes flick to Soap's before he takes his father's hand, "Ghost."

His father grimaces, "Interesting name." He laughs, brushing off the judgment he'd just leveled at him, "Must be cold if you're wearing a mask. Nothing quite matches a Scottish winter."

Since his father's arrival, Soap's mother has relaxed. She wraps an arm around his father's middle, smiling warmly for the first time since Soap had arrived.

"I made soup," She says sweetly, "It might not be cold yet."

"You two go ahead, we'll be in there in a second." He waves to them, waiting for them to vanish into the dining space.

"Didn't realize you grew up with money, MacTavish." Simon smirks

and drops his bag by the front door. Oliver jumps at his back before getting distracted by sniffing around the backpack.

“I didn’t. All this was paid for by my nan. My father inherited it when she passed. He didn’t tell us until Melanie graduated and went off to university.” Soap tosses his pack onto the couch.

“What do you mean by that?”

Soap rolls his head, feeling a pop in his neck, “My nan saved it to pay for our universities, but I ended up not going. He decided not to tell us. Pulled it out when Melanie got accepted into Yale.”

“So she got all the brains in the family then?”

“Cold, Simon.”

“Did you want to?”

Soap stops by the arch, “What?”

“Go to university?”

“No. I wanted to be a footballer.”

Simon hums.

“You?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Asshole.” Soap holds his leg out and they bump boots before joining his parents in the dining room. And somehow, it’s even more blinding than the beige living room. The table is a dark wood with blue table settings and a silver runner. An entire wall is just windows, fogged over from the heat inside the house.

His mother sets down two more bowls just as his father settles a pot in the center of the table. “Come and take a seat boys,” he says.

“Does your friend have any allergies?” His mother asks.

“No.” Ghost answers.

His mother’s shoulders are stiff as she sits down and she looks to Soap’s father like she doesn’t know what to do. Soap, she could handle, but him bringing odd people around must have been too much

for her. Ghost is an unknown variable and Soap shouldn't have brought him. He'd asked because he hadn't visited his parents without a buffer since he enlisted. When Melanie is around, they're kinder. They hid their judgment and disappointment well enough that Soap could get through a visit pretending they didn't happen. He'd hoped Ghost being someone new would accomplish the same thing. The thing about judgmental people is that they don't want you to know they're judgmental. They can't stand to have the lens turned on them. But he'd also underestimated their threshold for who they respected. Ghost had surpassed it. He fit awkwardly in spaces and still hadn't taken the mask off. He saw Ghost through their eyes – he spoke abruptly, dressed crudely, and took up too much space. The same things they'd thought about Soap as he grew up. But Ghost could handle it. Soap was counting on that.

His parents help themselves to lunch, delighting in picturesque pleasantries. *Smells delicious, Diane. Thank You, Matthew. Better grab yourselves some bowls before I eat it all. Matthew! There's enough to go around.* Soap gags a little.

Ghost helps himself. Soap kicks his leg under the table and lowers his voice, "You actually going to eat?"

"I can stare at it, if you like."

"Smart-ass."

"John!" His mother puts her hand to her chest, "Watch your language at the table."

Ghost raises an eyebrow that says the same thing that goes through Soap's head whenever his mother says something like that. If only they knew the things Melanie said when they weren't around.

He dumps a ladleful of soup into his bowl.

Ghost pulls his mask up over his lips. His mother's eyes narrow, but she doesn't say anything. No, she wouldn't, not in front of him. She'd wait and say something to Soap later. The expression on his father's face isn't lost on him either.

"So, Ghost." He sips politely at his lunch, "That's quite a nickname. How'd you get that?"

"That's classified."

“Have you been to Scotland before? Or is that classified as well?”

Ghost stirs the soup, examining the ingredients within it – celery, carrots, as well as bits of chicken. Like chicken noodle soup sans the noodles. “No. Haven’t had the pleasure.”

“We’re glad you’re here then. John, how’d the two of you meet?”

“Work,” he answers between bites.

“Melanie met Damien through work,” His mother adds.

Soap stops, mouth full of soup. He swallows hard. The soup goes down like a solid.

“Who’s Damien?” He chokes.

“She didn’t tell you?” She dabs her face with a cloth napkin, “When’s the last time you talked?”

“It’s been a while,” He admits, “Our timetables don’t sync up that well.”

“Damien is your sister’s fiancé. They got engaged, oh how long ago?”

“Two months.” His father supplies, “He’s a nice young man.”

“Isn’t-” Soap stumbles over his words, “Isn’t Mel a bit young to be engaged?”

His mother furrows her brow, “Your sister is twenty-three, John. I was pregnant with you by that age.”

“Damien is in school to be a veterinarian. He already has plans to open his own place in America.”

The last time Soap had seen Melanie in person had been at her graduation. Him and his parents had flown out to Connecticut to be there and she didn’t have a boyfriend – something that had been a point of criticism. They’d also talked back in October. By that timeline, she would have been dating Damien and close enough to get engaged. Why hadn’t she said anything?

“What about you, John?” His father waves a spoon at him, “You never answered my question. You got a girl who’s missing you right now?”

Soap’s ears start to ring.

His mother pats his father's arm, "We're just worried. Your job is very stressful and we just want to know you're taken care of when you come home."

Soap exhales through his nose slowly so his parents don't notice, "No girlfriend." He takes another bite before he can say anything else. Simon's thigh presses against him, sending him a warm comfort.

His father smiles tightly before turning to Ghost, "He was quite the ladies man in school. Nothing ever stuck though."

His mother slaps his arm, "Be nice. He's just busy saving the world." She smiles with her gums.

"Oh!" She puts her hand to her mouth. Always the animated character, "I didn't even think...We only have one guest room. We might have to set one of you up on the couch. Or John, if you're alright with it, you can sleep in Melanie's room."

He would not be doing that, no thank you.

Ghost grunts next to him, "Couch is fine."

"Are you sure?"

"We can figure it out later." Soap says, pursing his lips. They already knew where they were sleeping.

She twirls her spoon around, swirling the soup and rising oils back together, "Shame Melanie couldn't be here. You would love Damien."

"I bet I would." He forces a smile. He loves Melanie, but it's irritating listening to his parents talk only about their favorite parts of her. Her education, her work, her boyfriend. Sorry, fiancé. The one thing they could agree on was wanting her here. If she'd gotten engaged without telling him, what else had happened? He'd try calling her again tonight.

"You know," his father leans forward, "I was planning on going out with some friends from the club this evening. You and your friend are welcome to join."

"Ghost isn't a big drinker."

"Really?"

Ghost finishes his soup and pulls his mask down before speaking.

Soap's father squints at the motion. It's probably driving them mad that he still hasn't taken it off. Soap just hopes they don't bring it up.

"No."

"And the trip kind of drained us. You know how flying is." Translation, there is no way in hell he's spending a boys night out with his father.

"Don't you boys do a lot of flying? Figured you'd be used to it by now."

"Commercial flights are a different beast." Ghost leans forward, arms crossed on the table. "Make Helos seem like a cruise."

"I bet the mask doesn't help."

"Helps more than you think."

A swing and a miss on that front.

Soap continues to work at his soup. The warmth of it should be comforting, but it's almost too warm for him. Sweat builds on his brow and on his back. Nothing would be better than burying his head in the snow outside. Maybe he'd stay out there until he turned numb from the cold.

His father's phone rings somewhere in the pockets of his khakis. His mother narrows her eyes at him. Her mouth is full so she wouldn't dare speak but she shakes her head slowly, warning him against answering it while they have guests. If she had it her way, she'd have any and every electronic locked in a safe during each meal.

He smiles sheepishly at her and pulls the large sleek phone out of his pocket. That thing had to be brand new and expensive. Soap's own cracked piece of shit is still buried in his backpack on airplane mode. He steps away from the table, vanishing into the kitchen before answering.

His mother seems to remember she has guests sitting at the table. She swallows and turns back to Soap, "He's up for a promotion."

"Good for him."

The rough sound of the heaters pumping the room with hot air fills the silence around them. His mother then clears her throat, "Ghost, do you mind if John and I chat in private?"

"Not at all. Kitchen is this way?"

She nods, not even bothering to look at him and confirm where he's pointing. She hadn't looked at him since he finished his lunch and put the mask back on. What a great vacation already. Ghost gathers the empty bowls, including the one situated directly in front of her then follows after his father.

"I wish you would have told me you were bringing a guest, John. I don't like being unprepared."

"I know."

She sighs, "It's good to see you, though. You looked sick the last time we talked."

"I was. It's why I had some time off."

"You should have said something, we would have visited." She looks at Soap in the eye for the first time since he stepped foot in the door, the skin around her own blue eyes beginning to show her age. "I worry about you out there. I hear stories and there's a man who lives down the street who lost both his arms while overseas and -"

Soap stands, taking an empty seat next to her, cutting her off with a hug, "I know."

She brushes the scar on his chin with her thumb and stares at him with glassy watery eyes. "You could just retire and get a safe job. It's never too late for university."

"Mom."

"Your father's work is always looking for more people."

"Mom. I'm not going to die."

"You will and you'll die alone." She snaps.

Soap rubs her shoulder.

"No. I warned you it would happen." She lowers her voice, leaning in closer to her son, "How'd you get sick, John? How'd you get the scar?"

Soap pulls back, scooting his chair away. It is easy to want to slip into a petulant defense, bring a whine to his voice as if he were a child again and not a man nearing his thirties. How did parents have that effect on you? He reaches across the table for his untouched water

glass, just to delay responding. He wouldn't regress. He was a sergeant for a reason. He sips the lukewarm water, flexing the muscles in his arms to prevent from downing it all in one go and just drowning himself with it. That would be one way to get out of this conversation. Soap's hand shakes as he sets the glass down. Determine the best way to navigate this conversation without wanting to die.

"Hazards of the job." He tries to channel Price, the way he responds with a measured gruffness, almost like a movie soldier over a real one. He would not channel the captain's temper. His was volatile enough.

"Hazards?" His mother's head bobs up and down, "Hazards that have that friend of yours," she spits the word out, as if it had a different meaning. The tone stops Soap's heart, plunging him into silence. Even breathing would have been too loud. The pause is pregnant, nine months so, just to make Soap squirm under her gaze, so much like his own. "Feeling the need to wear that fucked up mask." She's biting at him. "Grow up, John."

Soap's breath returns to him in a single sharp inhale.

"You've always had a puffed up chest. Too big of an ego."

"Ego?"

"Do *not*, interrupt me." She turns away, closing her eyes and breathing slowly. She smiles to herself. It's pinched, accentuated with furrowed brows. She holds her last breath for a count of five. Her lips move with subtle words as she exhales and her hand touches her scarf, looking for something underneath it. When next she speaks, her words are calmer, taking more effort to squeeze out, "We just want you safe."

We just want you safe, his own voice hisses in the back of his head.

"Like you care." He cringes at the way his accent ramps up, spitting out a hard *r*.

"What?" She pulls back with wide eyes. It allows more of the overhead lights to hit her eyes directly, shrinking her pupils to dark pinpricks.

"You don't even have pictures of me hanging on the wall-"

"Yes we do-"

“Nothing recent. You’d think I died already looking at that stupid gallery wall.”

“*You* left, John. We didn’t-” Her words turn into whimpers, turning John into her attacker and leaving her, the innocent mother trying to deal with her petulant son.

“I didn’t *abandon* you. I called. Everyday for weeks, I called and called and not once did you pick up.” They both speak in hushed voices. His mother holds her head high, stretching her thin neck out. She swallows hard with each of Soap’s words.

She blinks a single tear out, “We didn’t want to think about you dying in a ditch somewhere, okay?”

“So ignoring me was better? Did you think I’d give up and come running back?”

“We did, John.” She bites, her innocent and injured look turning hard and angry once more as another tear streaks down her face, “Because that’s what you do. You gave up on school. You gave up on football. Why were we supposed to think the military would be any different?”

Soap breathes out through his nose. The temperature in the room had reached a boiling point, condensation dripping down the windows like rain. Through the streaks he can finally see outside at the house sitting next door, just a few feet away, virtually a carbon copy of the house he’s currently prisoner in.

“That’s what I thought.” She grabs the pot of soup that had been cooling in the center of the table. She slams the ceramic lid back on, but takes care to wipe up the broth dripping down the side before it falls and stains the cream-white table cloth or sullies the silver runner.

“Guest room is at the end of the hall. Oliver’s bed is in there so leave the door cracked.” She walks out with not so much as a glance in his direction.

Soap doesn’t wait for Ghost to return. He storms out of the dining room, trying to slow his steps into something that couldn’t be seen as fleeing. He didn’t flee no matter what his mother thought. People who ran from things didn’t fight a tank on foot with nothing but C4 and a friend at their side. She didn’t know.

He dumps his things in the guest room, ignoring even more beige. The most interesting thing about the room was that it was a mess,

nowhere near as put together as the rest of the house. The bed is shoved against the wall and had been hastily made. A dresser acts as the side table. The rest is filled with boxes, neatly stacked and situated far from the door all while creating a little cubby for dog things – a large plush bed, toys, topped off with full food and water bowls. His bag can join the rest.

Soap sits on the bed. It's soft. It doesn't even squeak under his weight. He'd be sleeping here for the next week. He'd prefer a dirt floor in a warzone to this.

He pulls his knees up to his chest, surveying the room in better detail.

The bog bed is large, even for a golden lab like Oliver. The stuffing is lumpy and squished in one place and the cream fabric is stained a darker colour. Surrounding it are toys. Some are newer, the colours vibrant and lively, while others are in tatters, muddy and muted. He slides off the bed, dragging the comforter with him. Was it a comforter if it wasn't comfortable?

Soap picks up the nearest toy, an orange bone. There's a hole in it and when he squeezes it, it wheezes instead of squeaks. He tosses it towards the best. He must have miscalculated because it bounces against the side of one of the boxes making up the walls of Oliver's room. They had a garage, so why was this room filled with boxes? Also, they'd lived here a few years now, there is no reason they should have this many boxes shoved in a room. He pulls the nearest box towards him. It's unlabeled, the corners dented. The edges are worn, as if it had been opened and closed multiple times. What could be in it?

5th January 2024|Suburb in Dundee, Scotland|14:00:02|Simon Riley

Soap's father, Matthew, looks nothing like his son. Soap is rough around the edges. This man before him is polished and annoyingly charming in the same way a plastic doll is. He's finishing his phone call, pocketing the phone after a hearty and fake laugh. His face falls, crinkling with wrinkles. The kitchen door closing behind Ghost clues him into his presence. The smile comes back, joined by a hand to his chest, "Didn't see you there! Boy do you move quiet for a guy your size."

Where Soap's eyelashes are thick and dark, Matthew's are short and stubby, framing greyish eyes. There's more grey in his hair than in his

wife's. Ghost finishes counting the appropriate amount of time before responding.

"It's a useful skill."

"I bet it is. Bet your parents loved that particular trait. For the longest time John couldn't go through the house without shaking the walls. He's always been a bit heavy handed. How long have you known each other?"

He leans against the counter, palms flat on their surface.

"Few years now."

"Does time move fast in your line of work? It's got to feel like a lifetime if he's bringing you around." He squints his eyes. Where Diane would never look him in the eye, Matthew hadn't stopped.

"Soa-Johnny's a good guy." Is his response.

"Taking in strays?" He smiles again with a tad too much teeth. It's fake as hell, but there's a hint of Johnny's smile in the way it's slightly higher on his left side.

"He does that."

Matthew nods at him once, sharp and terse. It is not until Ghost sets the bowls in the sink and turns the water on that he notices his purpose for even being in the kitchen.

"I'll get those! Appreciate the help though."

Ghost backs up, listening to the water and Matthew's humming. Seemed like he always had to be making noise. Even Soap knew when to quiet down. The corner of Matthew's lip twitches, followed by a bob in his throat. Ghost counts down again. 3, 2, 1 -

"John has always been impatient, so I see why he didn't want to finish school and decided to hop into that particular piranha pond, but what about you?"

"...My dad."

"Was he also in the military?"

"No. Just needed to be away from him. Military pays okay enough when you've got nothing else." He lets his sentence end on a harsh

note. Harsh enough to draw Matthew's gaze back to him. Abandoned is the nice smile. He levels a stern and calculating look at Ghost, lips pursed in a thin line and heavy brows hanging over his eyes.

"I'm sure he did his best."

"No doubt."

They fall into an uneasy silence. Well, uneasy on Matthew's part. Ghost is content to observe, waiting for the man to say more.

Matthew shuts the sink off and dries his hand on a nearby towel. The blue fabric had to be the only spot of colour in the entire house. Expected from someone like Ghost, but not from people who'd raised someone like Soap.

The other man looks Ghost up and down, continuing to pat his hands dry, "Maybe you should get some rest. Take some time to yourself."

Ghost holds his hand out again, "It was good to meet you." He isn't particularly big on handshakes or touching people unless he needs to, but it's worth it just to irritate Matthew. A man like him couldn't pass up the opportunity. It would be openly rude. He takes his hand and squeezes it tightly.

"Same here."

Diane huffs into the room, carrying the soup pot. She's grumbling to herself, barely noticing the tension between her husband and Ghost. She shoves past the latter. It gives him the opportunity to disappear back into the now empty dining room, Soap nowhere to be seen. That explains some things. Though he thought the fighting would start much later in the trip. A few hours, at the least.

Ghost retrieves his bag from Oliver's guard. The golden dog had been curled around it but leapt to his feet upon seeing Ghost. He wags his tail and pants, looking up at Ghost with large brown eyes. He needs to find Soap, so he waves the dog off, making his way into the hallway to the left of the entry. Oliver follows, butting his head into the back of Ghost's knees and leaving wet patches of drool on his jeans.

"What's got you so excited you mangy mutt?" He says with a smile, bending down and acquiescing to the canine's request. Oliver closes his eyes as Ghost scratches his chin and behind his ears, "I'm glad you're happy, but I need to find my sergeant." Oliver continues to slobber on his hands as he moves down the hallway. There aren't

many doors, but almost all of them are closed, except for one on the end. A pale white light shines into the dark hallway. Upon seeing the door, Oliver sprints the length of the corridor and shoves his way into the room. His tail whips behind him, disappearing shortly after.

Oliver sets his head in Soap lap. The sergeant is sitting on the floor of a small room, boxes scattered around him. He holds in his hands a medal. It hangs from his outstretched hand, spinning in front of him. The engraved letters catch the light, bouncing it around the room.

Ghost is quiet in his approach.

“I haven’t seen this in years.” Soap drops the medal back in the box, “Any of this.” He pulls another box towards him and pulls out a photo frame. Without looking behind him, Soap turns the frame to allow Ghost to see it. He’s standing in front of the UK flag, a red beret sitting crooked on his mohawk. He’s completely clean shaven and missing the wrinkles and chin scar that Ghost had become so familiar with. He stares directly at the camera with pursed lips and a clenched jaw, but still can’t get rid of that telltale smirk.

Soap dumps the frame unceremoniously in the box, shoving it away.

“You’d think I was dead.” He turns to Ghost, anger blazing in his eyes, “Did your family do this? When you joined up?”

Ghost closes the door, tossing his bag onto the bed in the corner. He grabs Oliver and moves him to Johnny’s other side. The dog kicks and snakes his tongue out to lick Soap’s face, but settles as soon as Ghost sets him down again. Ghost presses his leg up against Soap’s.

“No.” He answers honestly.

Soap scratches Oliver’s head, staring at his feet, “Why did I come here, Ghost?”

He takes Johnny’s free hand in his, squeezing tightly.

“We could be at home and I could pretend that these boxes don’t exist.”

“But would you want to?” Simon remembers a conversation much like this, happening in a kitchen a country away. It’s honestly more comfortable being on this side than where Soap’s currently sitting. He remembers the raw feeling of letting someone judge him because he could no longer trust his own judgement.

"*Suffocating*, I think is the word you used." He reminds him.

"Fuck you." He pulls his knees to his chest, leaning into Ghost's side.

"So the question is, do you actually want to talk about this?"

He shakes his head.

"Then come on."

Ghost hauls Soap up by his arm and doesn't let go, even as he grabs his bag from the bed.

Soap's parents hadn't emerged from the kitchen yet, giving them the perfect escape.

"Do I need my bag for this?"

"No. Grab your jacket." He orders. Soap does, attempting to navigate Ghost's hand on his arm.

Soap's face seems to clear as they exit the house. The temperature had dropped a few degrees since their arrival and the wind had picked up. It blows across Johnny's cheek, bringing a pinkness to them. He blinks a few times as the wind ruffles his hair.

"Do you know any private places nearby?" Ghost asks, turning the car on to warm up.

Soap zips his jacket up. "I'm not sure. I grew up outside Glasgow, not here."

"How far is that?"

"About an hour and a half south west of here. Two depending on what road you take."

"Road trip then. Hop in sergeant."

"That's a minimum four hour round trip L.t." He snaps, "I'm fine. I don't need to run away from my problems."

"Did I say you were running away? Hop in." He doesn't wait for Soap to respond. Ghost slides into the driver's seat, leaning over to open the passenger door. Soap stands at the front of the car, arms crossed. His hands are hidden in his armpits, looking for warmth. He huffs once. His breath puffs in front of his face. Ghost doesn't release his hold on

the car door, watching his partner intensely. Soap finally relents, slamming the car door behind him.

Soap stares out the window for the entirety of the drive, only speaking to guide Ghost through the unfamiliar streets. He borrows Ghost's phone for the first half of the trip but resorts to mindlessly scrolling through nothing once he's reached the area he is familiar with. Scrolling through what, Ghost doesn't know. It's not like either of them were big on social media. Ghost isn't even sure he has a single picture on his phone. Eventually, he takes the phone back, needing to preserve the battery. Soap sinks further in his seat, drumming his fingers on the window, leaving clean little fingerprints on the fogged over window. His brow hadn't lost that furrow. For a moment, they aren't sitting in a rental car in the middle of Scotland, they're in the back of a car in Mexico. Soap observes the streets around them, almost pouting as he takes in the sight of children buying balloons from armed men. Ghost observes him, drinking in his profile – the slight way the bridge of his nose rounds downwards but the tip points slightly upwards, the thickness of his eyebrows, and the way his upper lip is almost tilted inwards, adding to the thinness of them. Ghost stares at this profile now, like he had then. But then, when Soap had turned back towards him, he froze. One of the things his father had *hated* about Simon was his tendency to stare at whatever caught his attention, including people. Even now, staring feels like something he isn't allowed to do. Will he freeze the moment Soap turns to look at him again? Even though Simon had touched and held and kissed that face? Did the fact that when Soap is deeply held in the thralls of sleep and he is wide awake, he leans over and presses his thumb to Soap's pink lips, just to observe their softness, change anything? Is there a hand coming to swat him away?

He reaches out and places hand on Soap's knee. A single squeeze. *I'm right here.*

Soap directs him down a series of small roads, away from the main city of Glasgow into wooded areas. Each turn leads them further away, the homes becoming sparse. Ghost tries to keep his eyes on the road, waiting for any animals to jump out in front of them. The snow had started up again, turning the grey expanse before them a soft fuzzy white. Every house they pass pulls his gaze away until it's too far to see in his periphery.

The houses are far apart, broken up by large swathes of trees. Each house is a different style. Soap still hasn't said anything and Ghost couldn't know which one he'd grown up in. Was it the 70's style one

storey with the huge yard? Or was it the farm style, buried amongst small beautiful trees and wildflowers in the yards? Where had he found his warmth? Soap's childhood hadn't been ideal, but Ghost counts him lucky having grown up in a place like this. It beats a piece of shit flat in Manchester or the even worse place in London they'd moved to after his time in Mexico. Beth's family had been from there and offered to help them out. The woods offered more of an escape, in Ghost's mind.

"There's a service road just up the way," Soap points ahead of them to a barely there break in the trees. A red sign, buried within the dead bushes, points the way better than Soap's shaky hand, "No one comes out here so we can park without an issue."

"Haven't parked since I was a teenager."

Soap barely cracks a grin, "Liar."

"This where you take all the girls, MacTavish?" Ghost keeps his eyes on the dirt road, instantly less comfortable behind the wheel in such a small space.

Soap groans and sinks into his jacket, pulling his hood down over his eyes.

"Can we go back to you having a cold heart?" He grumbles. Without looking, he points to the left, "Park here."

There's what looks like an electrical box of some sorts and a space just big enough for a single car right next to it. The broken stems of razed bushes peek through the thicker layer of snow. It's up to Ghost's ankles, his socks saved by his boots only. It takes some coaxing on Ghost's part, in the form of a well-pointed glare, to get Soap out of the cab and into the wilderness. The falling snow paints his hair white and his face pink. Each of the snowflakes are carried sideways in a subtle breeze. Ghost blinks them out of his eyes.

He grabs his pack before slamming and locking the car door.

"Lead the way, Sergeant."

Soap inhales deeply, open mouthed. He closes his eyes, fanning those dark eyelashes across his cheeks. They're longer and darker than they had any right to be, like the man is wearing eyeliner or mascara. Ghost hated how long his eyelashes were until he saw Johnny's and learned to love them both.

Soap then sets off, deftly navigating the terrain, years of muscle memory taking over. Ghost follows in his footsteps to avoid tripping on a loose rock or stick. The silent streak continues, but it's different this time. Soap touches trees as they pass. He digs his fingers into frozen bark, peeling back moss. He treks forward, like a hunter. With the bag on his back and his sergeant in front of him, it's almost like being back at work. It shouldn't be comforting, given what happened last time he was in a snowy wooden forest. It's fucked up how that shit works, but he plays the cards he's dealt.

Soap climbs over a rock a few feet away then settles there.

"My old house is a few streets away from here." He says, breathing into his hands.

"But it's secluded?"

Soap casts a suspicious glance over his shoulder, "Are you going to kill me? What the fuck is going on?" He looks Ghost up and down, that furrow showing up once again. The man needed to stop that or it'd get stuck.

Ghost digs in his bag and pulls out a small plastic bag that he tosses to Soap. He catches it, eyes going wide as he sees what is inside.

"Is this...?" He holds it up.

"Low THC, so don't worry."

"How the hell did you get your hands on this? How'd you even get it through customs?"

Ghost drops his bag on the ground and roots around for his lighter, "I have my ways, MacTavish." He takes the bag from Johnny and pulls the joint out. He'd rolled it before they left, for emergencies only. He only ever kept enough for when his meds weren't working as fast as wanted them to. This stuff was nowhere near what he smoked as a teenager. When he told Gaz about this particular fact last month, he knew the sergeant didn't believe him, but it was true.

He would have liked to save this for if he needed it, but Johnny needed it more. He needed relaxation and the freedom to talk. So, he could have it. Ghost pulls his mask above his nose and places the joint between his lips.

"Have you ever done this before?" He mumbles as he goes to light the

paper.

"Had an edible once, but I couldn't risk it with regular drug testing."

"Downsides of playing sports?"

"I guess." Soap's eyes are glued to him as Ghost inhales. He never cared for the smell of weed, like a dead skunk, but he couldn't ignore its uses. It's effective. Effective enough to hide his anxieties at participating in any drug use, like his father and Tommy had. Another reason he kept such a small amount on him. He shakes the thought off.

He holds the smoke in his chest as he passes it to Johnny.

Soap doesn't hesitate putting the joint to his lips, but he doesn't inhale right away. The end burns in a bright orange. Smoke drifts away from them in the slight breeze that ruffles the dead trees and bushes around them. The end burns brighter as Soap takes his first inhale. Ghost exhales with him, the smoke combining in a single cloud in front of them. Ghost takes the joint back, watching Johnny's reaction.

"I'm learning something new about you everyday L.t." His voice is a little hoarse, but overall, he took it well.

Ghost inhales again, breathing out before speaking, "I've got to have some secrets for myself."

They pass the joint back and forth a few more times in silence. Soap lies back on the rock, staring up at the blue sky above them. The clouds are reflected in his eyes – beautiful white specks amongst the bright blue of his own eyes. Ghost joins him in lying down, holding the joint between his lips as he gets situated. Where Johnny stares at the sky, Simon stares at Johnny.

"We'll make it back before dinner, yeah?"

Ghost passes him the joint, "Of course."

"Good."

He sighs, exhaling another cloud of smoke. "I need to apologize."

"To whom?"

"My mom. Said some things I shouldn't have."

"Did you mean them?"

He's silent. Soap holds the joint between his fingers, examining both ends before passing it back.

"Yes."

"I spent years being silent," Ghost says, lips loosened by the subtle high, "Every time my dad came home drunk or high. Every time he hit my mom or me... Nothing."

Soap's eyes widen, but he doesn't interrupt.

"I thought that would make things better. They tell you to pay no mind to bullies because eventually they'll get bored. The torment didn't stop until I beat the shit out of that asshole and kicked him out of the house."

He looks up at the sky, "Don't apologize if you meant it. Talk to her, but don't apologize." He inhales deeply, passing it back to Soap.

He stares at it before finally taking it.

"Have you always solved your problems with fists?" Soap laughs, strained, but a laugh none-the-less.

"Sometimes I solve them with my mouth."

Another laugh, "Dirty bastard."

Ghost checks his watch. They'd been gone for the better part of the day. If they wanted to make it back before dinner, they needed to leave. He sighs, pulling his mask down.

Part of him wants to keep Johnny here, so he doesn't have to worry about his parents. The other part of him wants him to confront them and be happy. If he could repair his relationship with them, great. If he couldn't, maybe Ghost could give him the strength to move on. Only the second option resulted in any growth. Ghost sits up with a groan, looking over to Johnny.

He had closed his eyes, the joint hanging short and abandoned inbetween his fingers. He breathes in slowly. Ghost places his hand on his sternum, feeling each rise and fall of his chest. He kisses his lips. The cold had turned them red, leaving them on the cusp of being chapped. He doesn't feel this through his mask, but he feels the

warmth of Johnny's breath. He pushes Ghost away with a laugh, blowing a tiny bit of smoke in his face. He brings the joint up to his lips once again.

"You need to share this more often."

Ghost steals it back and folds his mask up, placing the joint to his lips and inhaling deeply. His eyes never leave Soap's even as he leans forward and locks his lips to Johnny's. He closes his eyes, tilting his head to better fit them together. Slowly, Simon exhales the smoke into Johnny's mouth, breaking the seal between the two of them enough to let some of the smoke out. Johnny's hands find their way to his hips, holding him in place. He coughs, expelling some of the smoke back in Simon's face, but he's smiling as he does.

"There," Simon pulls back, "I shared."

"Wish I planned a camping trip instead." He kisses Simon again, chasing the smoke and warmth again.

"Down sergeant. You wanted to be back before dinner. At this rate, it's going to be dark anyway."

Soap's head falls back. Ghost catches him before his head cracks against the stone.

"*Fuck me...* Sure you don't have another one?"

"Sorry, love."

Ghost hops up, pulling Soap up with him. The man grumbles and groans.

"Woah." Soap steadies himself, grabbing onto Ghost's forearms. He squeezes them. His smile grows larger and more crooked. He giggles, "You've got huge arms. Squishy and squeaky."

Ghost guides him back through the woods. Soap stumbles a bit but the smile never leaves his face.

He doesn't even have the car warmed up before Soap's asleep in the passenger seat. His hood is pulled over his eyes, arms crossed across his chest. Ghost drives slowly through the wooded neighbourhood, taking in the place Soap grew up. He makes a mental note to visit again before they leave for home.

Ghost pulls on Soap's seatbelt, making sure it's on tight. The last thing he needed was Soap busting his head on the dashboard. He snores slightly, sliding to rest his head on the window. He'd be starving once they got back.

He rolls the window down, airing out the smell. There was nothing he could do now about the pink ringing their eyes, but as long as Soap was calm and feeling better, then it didn't matter. Mission accomplished.

The dark closes in quickly around them and headlights fill his field of view. The white, yellow, and red lights dance across Soap's sleeping face. The open window allows bits of rain and snow into the car, pelting Ghost's bare hands with freezing water. It keeps him awake. He's more accustomed to being high than Soap is, but he still wants to curl up and take a nap. If they didn't have somewhere to be, he'd pull the car over and sleep in the back seat, mask pulled down over his eyes. Maybe Soap had the right idea with a camping trip.

—

Soap yawns first, stretching out. He only opens his eyes when he busts his fingers against something hard and cold. He blinks, finding his reflection in a frozen window.

Where was he? *The car?*

Familiar houses roll by at a slow and steady pace. Next to him, Ghost looks around at each of them.

"What're you looking for?" His voice is quieter than he wants it to, something thick coating his throat.

"Your folks' house. It's fucking dark out."

Soap sits up. His head is fuzzy, as if he still hadn't woken up. Is he dreaming? He doesn't even remember getting in the car. His tongue is glued to the roof of his mouth.

Ghost smacks his bag, resting near Soap's feet. "Right pocket." He says.

He prods it again and a plastic bottle crinkles. Soap retrieves it, sucking the water down in a single breath.

"I think this is it." Ghost turns the car into a driveway. There's a single light, casting a yellow glow.

"L.t., I don't think this is the right place."

There's an extra car with the lights on inside. Two people sit in it.

Ghost points to the front door where a wooden sign continues to hang.

Soap watches as the driver exits the other vehicle. It's a tall woman with long dark hair. She turns, using her hand to block the onslaught of rain and snow from her eyes. The light perfectly outlines her profile.

A mirror image of Soap's.

He's out the car in a second, slamming it behind him.

"*Melanie?*"

She drops her hand, "John?"

Chapter End Notes

The boys can get a little high, as a treat.

Also, fellow writers, do NOT write Soap eating soup.

and i left you alone in a house, not a home

Chapter Summary

Playlist

Chapter Notes

This chapter title comes from the song Brother by Mads Buckley

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I thought you weren't coming?" There's a swirl of emotions bubbling in Soap's chest, looking at his sister. One is the cool sweetness of seeing someone you love. The other is the hot rage of being lied to. It's this that colours the words he levies as his younger sister.

Melanie gapes at him, "John?" She repeats.

"They said you weren't coming."

"We wanted it to be a surprise."

"We?"

He suddenly remembers there had been two people in the car. The light had gone out, but Soap can still see the outline of the other person.

Another car door slams and Soap's eyes swing towards a man as he steps out. Soap's lack of familiarity with him and the dim lighting makes it so he cannot fully tell what he looks like, only that he's about the same height as Melanie with short hair. Melanie looks between the two of them, her loose hair swinging around. There's more volume to it now, curling with soft waves. Soap runs a hand through his slick hair, wet from melted snow. Once it dried, it would stick up the same way.

Her eyes are wide in the dark, "Uh...Damien, this is John. John," she waves her hand between them, "this is...Damien."

"Your fiancé." His voice is low, bordering on threatening.

Her brow falls, but before she can say anything, Damien whistles. "You weren't kidding," his voice is hard, like Phillip Graves',

“Practically twins.” He breathes, his breath clouding in front of him. He steps forward, despite the look on Soap’s face.

Soap ignores Damien’s outstretched hand to step up to Melanie. He bites his cheek and forces his face to soften, “It’s good to see you.” He barely hears his own voice.

Melanie screws her face even more in an expression he can’t fully read. He pulls her into a hug, very keenly aware of the smell of weed emanating off his clothes, but he can’t bring himself to care. He squeezes her tighter than he needs to, still warm from his anger, but god, at least she’s here.

“Fiancé?” He speaks directly into her ear.

“I meant to tell you,” She hugs him back, but with significantly less force.

Then another car door opens and slams shut. Melanie’s grip tightens around Soap’s middle. “Seems like we need to talk,” she grumbles.

Ghost’s presence creates a standoff amongst them, just a triangle of tension that warms up the cold January night. Even with his back turned towards Ghost and Damien, he can see the thick black webs connecting everyone present as they all get a feel for each other. Ghost’s mask and size was off-putting. Him and Damien were outsiders. Soap, not a tiny man himself, had not given the friendliest impression upon arrival.

Soap pulls out of the hug as another light joins the scene.

His mother stands at the front door, hand on Oliver’s collar. The porch light fully illuminates her face and the flurry of emotions it cycles through. First, joy at seeing Melanie, a warm welcoming smile on her face. This smile falters upon seeing Soap again and falls even more upon seeing Ghost, now standing at Soap’s back. The smile returns, albeit tighter once she sees Damien, still with his hand on their own rental car.

“Mellie!” She squeaks, ignoring her own pause as she took in the situation. She struggles to shove Oliver behind her but she succeeds in closing the door. With a brisk pace, she shoves herself between Soap and Melanie, hugging her daughter tightly. She leans back, arms still holding onto her, “Look at your hair! I love the curls!” She brushes her hair behind her ear, stilling for a moment. She then pulls the hair back, framing her face again.

She then turns her cursed attention to Soap. Her nose scrunches, "We were wondering where you went. Your phone went to voicemail."

Soap opens his mouth to speak, but his mother cuts them off with a shift of her shoulders, guiding Melanie to the front door with a gentle hand on her back. "John can grab your things. Let's get you warmed up."

"M not cold, Mom."

"Nonsense," their voices drift off, even as Melanie casts a glance over her shoulder. Soap hadn't moved from his spot, melting the snow underneath him. No one speaks until the front door closes. Then Damien clears his throat, finally turning towards the light as he approaches the boot of the car.

He holds his hand out to Ghost first while fumbling with the car lock.

Ghost nods at him.

"Right." He clears his throat again.

Damien's tanned and thin. *Probably a runner*, Soap thinks, watching as he pulls out two duffle bags. His dark hair is a warm reddish brown, almost black and almost as dark as his equally brown eyes. He's smiling, his eyes squinted a bit too much and deepening the wrinkles around his eyes. His eyes keep flicking around Soap's face and to Ghost's mask then back to his large snow boots.

Soap sighs, expelling his anger. He needs to keep a level head if he's going to survive, besides, Damien didn't do anything wrong. *Yet*.

He takes a duffle bag from Damien's gloved hand and holds out his free hand for a handshake. Damien takes it, relief flooding through his face. The squint lessens to a more natural state as his smile relaxes.

"John, right? Mel talks about you a lot."

"Call me Soap." The words flow without thinking, speaking almost out of reflex, just as his own nickname for his sister rolled off her fiancé's tongue.

Damien's face scrunches as he cocks his head to the side. Then his jaw slackens, "Military, right. I don't have any cool nicknames."

"That's fine."

Ghost continues to stand behind them with his hands in his pockets. He snuffles and works his jaw, obviously stifling a yawn.

Soap's stomach growls.

Dinner is surprisingly...uneventful. His parents spend the time catching up with Melanie and Damien. They drone on with pleasantries and ask when the wedding is going to be. Soap decides to treat this like a mission briefing. He'd eat his steak and potatoes and listen without saying a word. He'd take a page from Ghost's book, melt into the shadows.

All of this is made incredibly easy by the lethargy that had taken hold of him. Really what is left of energy goes to not yawning every five seconds.

But every time the wedding is mentioned (which seemed to be every other sentence) Melanie looks at him before turning her attention back to whoever asked.

Damien also remains silent, sliding his potatoes around his plate before nursing his wine glass. He swirls it around, takes a sip, then goes back to picking at his food. Hey at least looks up at the mentions of the wedding and nods along.

Damien helps clean up. Ghost offers but Soap's father cuts him off, sending him out of the kitchen. *Small kitchen was his excuse*. Melanie, Soap, and Ghost are exiled to the living room where Oliver has been making a corpse of one his toys.

Melanie paces, pulling her sweater over her hands and pointedly not looking at Soap.

Ghost sits at the end of the couch, immediately making him the subject of Oliver's attention. The dog trots over with the toy in his mouth. He hops onto Simon's lap and drops the toy, looking up at him expectantly.

Simon grabs the toy and pitches it down the hallway. Oliver leaps over the arm of the couch and goes tearing after it.

Both Melanie and Soap watch. She then looks back over at Soap, fiddling with a ring on her finger. She ducks it out of view before Soap can get a better look at it.

She takes a step towards Ghost, "I'm Melanie, but I'm sure you knew

that."

Ghost holds his hand out. *He holds his hand out.* "Ghost."

Melanie smiles, showing the tiniest bit of teeth.

Oliver comes back with a different toy in his mouth. He brings it to Ghost but doesn't release it. Ghost reaches for it and Oliver backs away, tail wagging.

If there was any time to have *that*. conversation, it would be now. He looks to Ghost, trying to convey everything with just his eyes. Ghost had mastered this ability. It's a useful skill.

Ghost nods once, getting up and following Oliver, indulging in his cat and mouse game. A door closes in the hallway.

"Wedding?" Soap questions, leaning back on the couch with his arms crossed.

She sighs, falling onto the couch next to him, "I didn't want you to worry. We aren't even planning the wedding yet."

"Why not?"

"I want you there." She crosses her legs, "But you're busy. Damien's fine with waiting until you've got time."

"I could have taken some time, if I had *known*."

Melanie swings her hands out, shaking them in the air as she struggles to think of what to say. She then huffs and slaps them back onto her legs, "I didn't know it was going to happen! We're still in school and I certainly never considered myself to be the engaged type!" She looks at Soap with wide eyes, "Besides, I never know when I can reach you. You're all over the place."

Soap curls in on himself even more, pulling one leg up underneath him. He found doing this quickly made his leg go numb, but Ghost does it and it seems to work for him, "Just call."

"I could say the same for you!" Melanie pulls her hair behind her ears, revealing two new piercings and small stretched gauges. She searches for something on her wrists then gives up with an exasperated sigh and settles for twisting her hair into a knot to get it out of her face. Her cheeks are flushed almost as red as her sweater. The next time she

speaks, it's quieter but less conversational, as if she were having a debate in class, "We barely talk anymore, Jay."

"I text you whenever I can."

"Texts," her brows pinch together and she turns her entire body to look at him, pulling her legs up onto the couch as well, "Are the problem. It isn't communicating when it's sent at one in the morning. Then I don't see it for hours and by the time I respond, you can't answer anymore. At that point, you aren't even my brother anymore."

"I'll always be your brother."

"You haven't felt like my brother in a long time. Not since you left."

Soap pulls back, "I needed to get out the house. You're telling me you could have handled *them*?" He nods his head back towards the kitchen, "Day in and out?"

"I had to, John! You think they just stopped because their punching bag went off to war? Nothing I did was right! The As weren't perfect. I wasn't making enough at my part-time. I wasn't social enough. The worst part of it, I couldn't even vent to you like we used to."

"We both were alone. I just didn't have any say in it." She stands and stalks off into her room.

Ghost peeks his head out once her door closes.

Soap should follow her, not to explain himself. There's nothing he could say without invalidating her feelings on the matter. But what he really wants is to crawl into bed and pretend he was back in his flat, with Simon's arms curled around him and just forget this awful day. He still hadn't shaken off the effects of the weed. It's a bit early to turn into bed, but his parents wouldn't question it. They'd just flown in. Besides, they'd probably welcome not having to see him or Ghost for the next few hours.

He slips his arms around Ghost as soon as he's within reach. The larger man pulls them both into the bedroom.

"Do you want a shower?" Ghost asks, brushing his hand through Soap's hair. "Wash away the day."

Soap buries his face in his jacket, the smell of weed and airport even more prevalent in the thick fabric. He hadn't taken it off since they

arrived. Soap unzips it and pressing in closer. He turns so they're back to back. Then, he zips the jacket back up, stretching the fabric out around their very large forms. Ghost sighs, the exhale creating a bit more room in the jacket. He wraps his arms around Soap. After a few moments, they begin to rock slightly side to side, as if about to dance.

"I just want to go to sleep," Soap answers after a while, "And maybe not wake up."

Ghost doesn't try to correct him. He just holds him.

—

Nine months.

That's what they told him, at least. It doesn't sound real. If you'd asked him how long he was gone, his answer would depend on the day. Some days, he could have sworn it was only a month at most. There was no way he could have made it out of *that*, had it been any longer. That is the answer he gives after those nights where the dreams speed by in a flurry of half-forgotten violent episodes. In these dreams, he fights, even against those trying to help him. Other days, he would tell you he had to spend years there. Nine months was not enough time for what he went through.

For the longest time, his dreams kept him locked in that cursed coffin, the one he couldn't bring himself to tell Johnny about. Sometimes, his dreams were startling accurate recreations of what happened, but instead of the blood-rushing silence of reality, his ears filled with the choked and high-pitched laughing of Vernon's decaying laughed, his mocking assisted by a chorus of wriggling maggots, joining together in a cacophony of cackling as he dug through never ending layers of wood, dirt, and sand. His broken arm lay useless at his side, a breeding ground for new rot, decaying quicker than he thought possible. His good hand cracked through the layers above him, losing pieces of itself along the way. Chunks of his own flesh peeled away from the splintering bone of his fingers and fell upon his face to join the soup of decomposition he found himself stewing in. That dream only ended once his skeletal hand broke through dirt and found muscle. That's when a torrent of his own blood came crashing down on him and he woke up in a puddle of his own sweat, quickly followed by the chasing crash of sickly sour vomit.

Those dreams were less now. All in all, he probably wouldn't even rank that as his worst experience. Just in those days, it was the most

recent. Now, the body beside him cycles through various people, changing to so many people throughout the years he lost track of who appeared the most. It could have been his mother. Or Tommy. Or Beth. Or Joseph. Sometimes his father made an appearance. Other times it's some poor soul who found themselves on the unfortunate end of Ghost's quick blades.

Ghost stared through his rifle scope, tracking a group of shadows through Las Almas. He couldn't hear them from this distance, but he'd been around enough power-hungry paramilitary groups to get a good enough idea. He mouthed along with their imaginary conversation, just waiting for Soap to make an appearance.

The church had a good height advantage, but the surrounding buildings' closeness made it near impossible to track a single person ducking in and out of buildings. Each time he disappeared, Ghost had to breathe in deeply and steady his aim. It was easier to focus on the dumbasses leaving themselves wide open than tracking someone skilled like Soap. He had to trust him.

"You'd think you'd be smarter than that, English." A voice sneered behind him. That voice was a staple in his dreams. He knew it as well as his own. Perhaps better.

Roba kneels next to him, watching out the church window.

"Trust? You barely know him. A few glances around briefing rooms? That's nothing. You had more conversations with Vernon."

Ghost didn't respond. Instead, he wheeled his rifle towards a single Shadow. He waited until the Shadow let go of his radio and reached into his pocket for something. He pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. Ghost barely registered the trigger pull. The Shadow fell and the sound, although silenced, still drew the attention of the previous group. Two of them peeled off.

Ghost smirked, Smoking kills.

"You always were the quiet type, English."

His smirk fell as he returned his attention to a certain Scottish man, limping his way through an alley. The rain continued to mist and Soap looked up, eyes searching the skyline until they found the church.

A weight settled across his back. The next time Roba spoke, his ghostly voice was right in Ghost's ear. It might have been in his own head.

"You act only when I tell you to." His hand clasped over Ghost's, finger resting over his on the trigger.

"That includes breathing,"

Soap didn't move, still looking up at the church. The rain pelted his face, washing away dirt and mud. The street lamps created sparkles of sweat and rain on his cheeks. His eyes glittered with life. He would make it.

"Pissing."

Soap's hand went to his radio. Ghost's own radio crackled to life. Instead of Soap's accented voice, it was Roba's, doubling up around him.

"Everything."

Roba and Ghost's fingers squeezed the trigger.

Soap's head whipped back with a spray of red. Ghost watched through his scope as Soap fell backwards, lifeless. The rain fell harder. A puddle of crimson and rain grew around Soap's mussed mohawk.

"Good boy," Roba ran a hand over Ghost's masked head.

Warm breaths on his neck.

Skin on skin contact.

Simon fails out, elbowing whoever is behind him. His eyes are open, wide and unseeing, still oppressed by dreamed torment.

The warmth doesn't retreat. Instead it locks on, tight around his forearms, waiting for the moment to break them. He wants to scream and bite and growl, all the things he'd never brought himself to do. Something freezes his jaw shut – a phantom pain residing from years ago as a wire skeleton locked him into silence. His skin burns hot and feverish, made worse by the hands on him.

An elbow brushes his hip and something surges through him, finally giving him some strength for once in his miserable life. He thrusts his knee upwards, connecting with someone's ribs.

A gasping inhale of breath finally frees him from the dark of his mind.

Simon scrambles in the sheets, looking for a weapon of any kind until his burning and bleary eyes catch sight of whoever he'd thrown off of him.

Johnny lies next to him, curling on his side and clutching his ribs. He breathes shallowly and even, hiding how breathless he really is.

Ghost's jaw is still frozen, keeping buried everything he wants to say in this moment. He can't even bring himself to apologize even though the words themselves lay heavy on his swollen and cotton covered tongue. He chokes on that thickness, feeling nowhere for the air and bile to go.

He doesn't even realize his ears are ringing until they clear and he can hear Soap talking. The other man lets out a breathless chuckle.

"That fucking smarts." He sits up and groans, rubbing his ribs, already a patchwork of reds and purples from previous nights where Ghost had woken up in a similar state.

Still, Ghost can't bring himself to talk. The months he spent silent come rushing back to chain him, slapping cold and rusted manacles around his broken form and dragging him back to that cursed sand pit he'd found himself never quite able to climb out of.

This. This is why he never pursued any romantic relationships. Too long, waking to a person behind him meant danger. It meant locking up and freezing for the sake of his own cracking dwindling sanity. He should have learned years ago that he hadn't escaped with any of it intact, not if he was lying here now, unable to speak. Unable to be held by a man he so desperately wants to give *everything* to. So many fucking wants and he's helpless with all of them.

Soap reaches out to him. *Johnny* reaches out, touching a soft hand to his trembling arm. *When had that started?* Every muscle in Ghost's left arm seizes, remembering the weight of a heavy boot tread on them. He flinches away, withering under the fucking pitiful look Johnny gives him as he retracts his hand.

And of course, it's that moment that Ghost is able to work his mouth again, and the words that come out aren't an apology or an explanation, or even a sob that he wishes he could bury in Johnny's chest. No.

He leans over, reaching past Soap and grabbing his balaclava. The sweat coating his hands soaks the old thin fabric instantly.

"I'll sleep on the couch." His dumb fucking brain suggests.

Soap moves to grab him again, but thinks better of it, dropping his

hand to his lap. But he still leans in front of Ghost, getting his point across.

"I'm fine. Spooked me is all." He says gruffly. His hand inches towards his aching ribs again. Ghost's eyes snap to the movement and he stops, bringing his hand back to the large empty space between them.

Ghost sighs, yanking his sweaty balaclava over his face and flopping back onto his damp pillow. *Had he been crying?* He pulls the blankets back up to his chin, shoving himself against the wall, as far from Soap as possible.

"I was already awake." Soap shifts in the bed.

"Good for you." He grumbles.

For a few minutes, the only thing that fills the room are Oliver's soft snores.

"How'd it happen this time?" Ghost asks, turning his head every so slightly to peek over his shoulder. Soap is on his back, staring at the dark ceiling.

Soap exhales, his cheeks puffing. "Hassan. Chicago. The usual."

Ghost returns his gaze to the wall, "You should talk to someone about it."

"I'm talking to you."

"Rotten choice."

"Well, I'm not the smartest sniper in the barracks."

Ghost yanks the mask further down before burying his face in his pillow. He needs to shave or else he'd claw his own face off. Even now, he shoves his hands under the cold pillow to fight the urges.

Time, again, is odd. He could have fallen asleep moments later or hours later.

Soap is gone when he wakes. The blankets had been tossed aside, resting entirely on Ghost. Meanwhile, Soap's bag sits in his place, open with his clothes unfolded. The room itself no longer smells of musty potpourri and instead damp and fresh. Ghost sees a towel on the floor when he leans over to grab his phone. He fumbles blindly until his hand hits something. It isn't until the bright white screen is

blinding him that he realizes his mistake.

It is Soap's cracked phone screen that greets him. It is filled with notifications from yesterday, but no missed calls, Ghost notes.

He sets it down, not even checking the time like he intended. The light was too bright. He still blinks it away. He listens instead, picking out the sounds of the house. He'd learned long ago how to pick out the individual sounds around him – identifying them even if they were unfamiliar.

The most obvious sound is that of dog nails clicking against wood floors. He closes his eyes, trying to pick out everything else. The next sound is that of a shower – not Soap, clearly someone else. There are some other light footsteps, somewhere dirtier down the hall.

Ghost rolls out of bed, pushing Soap's bag out of the way and reaching for his own. He needed a shower as well. His hair is a greasy matted mess from being shoved under his mask. He'd given himself a quick rinse before bed, but he'd still slept with his greasepaint caked on. It dries out his eyes, makes him grouchy. He should have done a better job but Soap had wanted to go to sleep and what Johnny wanted, he got if Ghost got any say in it. He'd spent too long ignoring him. Least he could do was hold him after a shit day.

Though a shitty part of him is glad that he's not the one having a bad day for once.

Ghost waits for the shower to shut off before making his exit.

He blames his bleary-eyed, just woke up, state for the fact he bumps into someone. He curses under his breath before even registering who it is.

Before he can apologize, the other person is – Melanie.

She looks up at with him Johnny's eyes.

“Sorry about that.” She yawns, her Scottish accent particularly thick. Still nowhere near as thick as Soap's. She eyes the clothes in his hands and grimaces, “And sorry about the hot water. There wasn't much of it to begin with.”

“Not a problem.” His own voice cracks with sleep.

“Yeah,” she chuckles, “I bet you and John are probably used to that.”

Her smile stretches thin before turning into a straight line, combined with furrowed brows.

Ghost nods, staring down at his socks.

Melanie shuffles past him, rubbing her nose.

“Melanie.”

He feels her stop, becoming a solid presence behind him.

“I had a brother,” He finally turns to her.

“Had?”

He’s passed.”

Melanie wrings the towel in her hand, dripping water onto the floor around her feet – like rain on a cobblestone street. “Was – Was he also in the military?”

“No, but I left him in a shitty place. He was pissed at me for a long time.” The screaming matches come back to him, both him and Tommy saying things they shouldn’t have. All things they hadn’t meant and never apologized for. They just pretended like it never happened.

“Did you make up?” She tilts her head to the side. Her hair is clipped away from her face and for a moment, in the darkness of the hall, it’s like he’s talking to Soap again. Maybe this time he could do this right. He could be brave and tell the story up front instead of hiding behind a manilla folder.

“We did. Even got the luxury of having his kid named after me.”

Melanie smiles, the corner crooking up ever so slightly, “That’s good.”

Ghost can’t help but mirror that smile. This is good. He did something right.

“Thank you, Ghost. Oh and it was nice meeting you.”

The next word that leaves his mouth isn’t one he plans, “Simon. Figured Johnny’s gonna slip and tell you anyway.” He cheeks heat instantly.

Melanie’s smile grows, “He lets you call him Johnny?”

"I can get away with a lot."

She snorts, "I'll bet. Anyway, I'll see you at breakfast...Simon."

He gives her a terse wave before disappearing into the bathroom. Immediately after the door is closed, Oliver begins scratching on the outside, begging to be let in. Ghost lets the dog whine as he locks the door.

He showers quickly, scrubbing away the rest of the greasepaint. The cold water does a bad job of fighting it, so he scrubs his scarred skin raw. The soaps available to him are obnoxiously artificially floral. The bathroom reeks of it and if it wasn't for the airport stink and weed, he would skip it all together. He sneezes once as the scent hits his nose. Oliver barks in response. He hadn't had such a devout follower since Joseph. The kid followed him all throughout his mother's flat whenever he was babysitting. If Simon was watching TV, Joseph was next to him, scribbling on his cast or his jeans or on his bare arm, drawing dinosaurs or people on his surgery scars. Now he has a dog he met yesterday.

Simon washes away the soap, running his hand down the long white scar on his left arm, hidden under his tattoo. He hadn't planned on adding the flames, but it was the best way to cover it and fix some of the damaged images. Maybe he should get some more and cover some of the other scars.

Compared to lunch and dinner, breakfast is a casual affair. Diane and Matthew had set out simple eggs and bacon on the dining table for people to grab on their own. Despite this, Soap is still nowhere to be seen.

Damien is trapped in conversation with Matthew. If he had to describe the man with a single word, it'd be skittish. Ghost makes his presence known as he pulls out his chair. Damien's entire body freezes as he turns his head slowly to look at Ghost with his large brown eyes. He seems to calm down when Ghost readies a plate. He puts entirely too much food on it, but each scooping motion seems to settle the man. A vet, he recalls.

"Have you always wanted to work with animals?" He asks.

Damien sucks down his orange juice before answering, "Yeah."

"That's good."

Matthew and Diane stare at him, hands hovering over their plates.

Ghost grabs a glass and tops it off with orange juice, balancing it on the plate and leaving three gaping people behind him. He passes Melanie again before heading outside, the food still balanced on one hand.

Soap sits on the front porch, letting the snow dust his shoulders. He holds a steaming mug in his hands.

"Irish coffee this early in the morning?"

Soap doesn't look up. "I've been up for a while."

Ghost liberates the mug and deposits the breakfast plate in his lap. He then sets the mug down behind him and frees two forks from the piles of eggs.

> "How'd you know I was out here?" Soap takes the fork and shoves the eggs around the plate, freeing some of the hidden bacon.

"It's my job to know everything, sergeant. That includes where you are."

He snorts, "You sound like Price."

Ghost folds his mask above his nose and begins to dig into breakfast, taking a pointed bite of bacon.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?" He says through another bite.

"Sit there like you got any sleep."

"Ghosts don't need sleep."

Soap snorts, looking away, but he does scoop some eggs onto his fork.

"Where do ghosts like to go on vacation?"

Soap doesn't verbally respond, but he does raise an eyebrow at him.

"Boo York."

Soap groans.

"Another?"

"No." He responds quickly through a mouthful of eggs.

"Your loss." He sips the orange juice, then moves it to sit on the porch.

When he looks up, Soap is grimacing at him, "How do you drink that shit?"

"Orange juice?"

"Yeah."

"It's good, sergeant. Good for you."

Soap reaches back for his Irish coffee. Ghost places a hand over it. It had cooled considerably while sitting on the porch surrounded by snow. Even the relatively fresh eggs and bacon had cooled to room temperature in the short time they'd been put here together. Ghost's ass was frozen as well. Soap's had to be downright numb. <

Ghost shakes his head, pulling the cup away and dumping it out in the barren flower bed next to them.

Soap glowers at him. The sullen look grows deeper as he shoves the juice into his now empty hand. "Drink up."

"You know the acid and sugars are bad for your teeth, right? Not to mention the damage to the stomach lining."

"Didn't realize I was on vacation with Doc."

Soap grumbles as he sips at the juice. He winces as it touches his tongue.

"Knock, knock."

"Can you piss off with the cheery mood? It's weird on you."

"You're supposed to say who's there, Johnny."

He mumbles something.

"Orange."

"Fuck you. You're not even setting up that joke correctly." Johnny swallows another mouthful of eggs, fighting with himself to keep a

smile hidden. Ghost gently grabs onto his chin, feeling the bite of cold gracing his skin. How long had he been out here?

Ghost succeeds in pulling the smile out with a single kiss, breathing warmth into his frozen face.

"Now," He pats his cheek, "Finish up your breakfast."

There's only centimeters between them when the front door opens. Soap scoots back so fast, the plate almost tips off his legs, even then, some of the food falls to the ground.

Melanie stands there, bundled up in a nice coat and thick knitted scarf. "Great day for breakfast outdoors."

"I thought so."

"I was going to take Damien down to Glasgow today. Spend the day showing him around."

"Sounds like a plan."

She shifts around, burying her hands in her pockets. Ghost elbows Soap.

"Fucker." He hisses. "Mind if we go with you?"

Melanie's shoulders sag with melting tension, "We want to get an early start."

"It's a long round trip." Ghost gathers up the plate, shoveling the rest of the food in his mouth. Soap fights for a few forkfuls.

She chuckles, "Hurry up bin boys."

"Aye, Aye, Captain."

—

Ghost gets motion sick which is why he always drives. He says he likes the control but Soap isn't stupid.

But with Melanie driving and Damien taking the passenger seat, Ghost and Soap are left shoveled into the back seat. It isn't a terrible fit. Mel had paid extra for a bigger rental car apparently.

As soon as Damien has the heat going – another thing Ghost never let

Soap do – Melanie hooks up her phone and turns on a playlist of American Indie pop music. For the first hour leg of the trip, only Damien sings while she navigates. Hour two hits and they're both singing their hearts out. Melanie frequently takes her eyes off the road to look at Damien, crooning and harmonizing. Soap grips the back of her seat, ready to force her face forward on the icy road so as to not drive off to their painful crushing deaths. He's on leave to avoid that sort of thing.

Damien's muscles have loosened since they left. He smiles brightly at Soap through the rear view mirror, his eyes squinting considerably, "Not a fan of this music."

"I just don't know it."

"John listens to grandpa music!" Melanie yells over the sound, "He doesn't know anything produced in this century!"

Damien shakes his head and turns the volume down.

"Like Aerosmith? ...The regular Smiths?"

Melanie fumbles for the phone and tosses it into Damien's lap, "Just find the playlist. It has his name on it."

"Neither of those bands are that old."

"Older than me. Our nan used to call it *youth music*."

Damien scrunches his face, scrolling through the thousands of playlists on Melanie's phone. How he can see the display through the cracks is beyond Soap. The sheer number of spiderweb fractures makes his own phone look brand new. Damien holds the phone up triumphantly.

It takes some squinting but Soap sees the a title surrounded by star emojis. *John's Old Man Playlist*. Damien presses the shuffle button before he sees what's on it.

"I put songs I know you like and some newer stuff I thought you would."

The first song that starts playing doesn't paint Soap in a good light, because it is grandpa music. He pulls his hat down over his ears as *Long Long Time* by Linda Ronstadt plays through the car speakers.

"See, grandpa music." Melanie takes a harsh turn.

"Nan listened to it constantly when it came out. But she wasn't even a nan when that happened."

"Potayto, potahto."

"It's a nice song." Ghost speaks for the first time since the drive started.

"You haven't heard it before?" Soap asks.

Ghost shakes his head, "Haven't listened to a lot of music. Got burnt out on it."

"How do you get burnt out on music?" Melanie looks at him through the rear view mirror. She had forgone makeup today, making her look tanner.

"Concerts when I was younger. My father took me."

"That's cool."

"They were terrible."

"Oh."

Damien turns the volume back up. It's perfect cover for what Soap says next, "Maybe I should take to a good one. Drinks, cheap food, *good* music."

] "You can do that at home."

"The energy is different when you're crammed together. Everyone's sweating and you almost can't hear the music, but you can *feel* it." Soap gently grabs Ghost's hand. When they'd first gotten together, he always tensed up at his touch. He avoided grabbing his arms whenever he could. Now, his arm goes slack as Soap guides it to the door speaker, practically draping the man across his lap. Ghost may be asexual, but Soap isn't and the pose is precarious. He presses further into his seat. Then he presses Ghost's palm to the speaker.

Long Long Time probably isn't the best song to do this with. It's not base heavy and overall, very soft and bittersweet.

But the song fades out and another one starts. Soap flushes, embarrassed as Aerosmith does indeed, start playing.

Ghost raises an eyebrow. Yes, Damien had read him that easily. *Sweet Emotion* begins playing. The audio quality is better than the previous

song and it's much louder even though the volume hasn't changed. Each instrument and vocal thrums through Ghost's solid arm and into Soap's body. With his hand on Ghost's wrist, he feels his heart best match up with the beat of the music.

After the chorus, Soap releases his hand, letting him sit back up.

"Find a concert and we'll go."

"Quite the to-do list we've got."

"We've got time, Johnny." His brown eyes crinkle. In the low light of the car, they're black. Perfect little onyx spheres that shine.

"So," Soap turns back to the rest of the car, hoping to shake away the blush and...other things, "What's first?"

"That park near school."

"Where you hid the-"

"Yes!" Melanie snaps, her entire face turning redder than her scarf. The two become one for a split second.

"Hid what?" Damien looks between them.

"Nothing! I didn't hide anything in the park. Nothing. At. All. And if he tells you anything else, he's a liar and a scoundrel."

"Scoundrel?"

Melanie turns the music up.

Ghost taps Soap's leg. He then mimes walking and a shovel.

Soap nods, mouthing *affirmative*.

They have a mission that isn't aimlessly wandering through a public park in the middle of the city. They could try to get into their old school later, depending on how much trouble Melanie wanted to get into.

"You know what?" Melanie's yelling over the music, "No more talking until we get there. I better hear singing or I getting coffee for me and letting you all starve!"

"She's vicious." Ghost whispers.

Soap nods, *I know*.

"Wonder where she gets it from?"

"Singing!" Melanie commands.

Neither do, but they stay quiet, watching as Melanie and Damien sing their hearts out. Damien holds his phone up to his mouth, singing loudly with only the chorus of some songs. He doesn't know them nearly as well as the ones on Melanie's playlist. Soap sings along in his own head. No one needed to hear his singing voice in such a small space. That is between drunk him and the equally drunk patrons at a karaoke. And he couldn't imagine Ghost actually singing. He's hummed while cleaning, painting, and doing dishes, but nothing close to singing. Picturing it now, Soap can only see Ghost opening his mouth and black smoke pouring forth as he summons ravens or some other shit, not Celine Dion. *Steaming bloody Jesus, she better not have put any Celine Dion on this playlist.*

"I fucking mean it, John. There will be singing at my wedding so you better start practicing."

Soap grumbles the first couple songs but by the time they're pulling over on an old familiar street, he's screaming along with Melanie and Damien. Despite the cold, they roll the windows down to let the sound out. The finish out the current song before rolling the windows backup and exiting the vehicle.

The street is smaller than he remembers – the buildings packed tighter, the street lamps shorter, and the pavement crumbling even more than before. Soap almost rolls his ankle on the curb.

"Fucking hell." He hisses.

"I thought you were elite military," Melanie sings her bag over her shoulder.

"Shape up, Soap." Ghost grabs his shoulder and pulls him back to his feet. His hand lingers until Melanie ruins the moment.

"Soap?"

He glares at Ghost.

"My callsign."

Melanie laughs, the sound carrying throughout the street. Some people stop but there are plenty who don't. Their drive took long enough that people were out and about getting late breakfast, early lunch, or just coffee. They'd have to stop for food of their own before their drive back.

"How did you get that?"

"Classified." Ghost and Soap say at the same time.

She snorts, "Yeah. *Okay.*"

He waits until Melanie and Damien are out of earshot.

"I will fucking kill you for that." He hisses.

Ghost does that half-eye roll thing where he throws his head to the side without actually rolling his eyes, "I've no doubt. But I'm sure I can change your mind if you let me live long enough."

"What does that mean?"

He smirks then plants a firm smack of Soap's ass.

"Fucker." Soap chuckles, rubbing the new sore spot before catching up with the rest of his group. It was time to get to the real meat of this trip.

Chapter End Notes

IMPORTANT UPDATE: I am not abandoning this fic or going on hiatus, but I will be stretching out updates. I jump around when writing and I had a lot of this prewritten which is why I was able to give you guys regular updates. We've reached the part where I am writing completely new content so ***instead of once a week updates, we'll do once every two weeks.*** These past two weeks I have had work, midterms, and spring break so I haven't been working on this fic as much as I would have liked. I am working on a fun little au that is going to be a bit spooky. There is also my [Tumblr](#) where I take requests and post mini-fics as well as my short - *considerations of the family dream* - that still needs one last update. Updates may be slow, but they will not stop.

Stay frosty guys!

so this could be the death of me, or maybe just a better me

Chapter Summary

Playlist

This chapter title comes from the song World's Smallest Violin by AJR

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The park is empty, devoid of anyone who isn't just passing through. The trees drift silently around the paved park paths, their branches bare and dead, leaving visible the abandoned lives within them. Tattered nests of fabric and brambles rest empty, the birds long gone for the winter.

Melanie and Damien walk arm and arm a few feet in front of them, making their way through the snow.

Soap hangs back, wanting to mirror their actions. The desire to thread his arm through Ghost's is overwhelmingly hot and sharp, stinging like the bite of a bullet. Instead he keeps his hands in his pockets, staying cold and alone.

"I told Melanie she can call me Simon." Ghost's voice is hoarse. He rubs his nose on his shoulder, not looking at Soap even as he speaks. His mask shifts, exposing the skin on the back of his neck. It's red from the wind chill. Oh how easily he could place his hand on the crimson there and warm it.

Soap hums. Equally lost in both his imagination and the confession.

"It makes your parents uncomfortable," He notes, looking over for a more substantial form of reaction.

"Then tell them to call you whatever you want." He grunts, not wanting to get into a conversation about his parents. Holding his hand like a love-sick school boy would be much better.

This time it's Ghost that doesn't respond and that is what pulls Soap's gaze to him.

He looks up at the sky. The clouds had cleared, revealing the wintery

blue above them.

"Ghost is fine." There's an uptilt to the end of his words, confident and slightly joyous. It's bizarre. Everything about this man is. It births a giddiness in his chest, wanting to pull his lips to him and kiss him until he laughs. Even now, it still takes a lot to get a genuine laugh from Ghost. He'd had the privilege of seeing it. He had sucked in his lip, exhaling the laugh out through his nose before letting the rest tumble from somewhere deep in his chest. However wonderful it is, it's still rare. Especially after a night like last night. Like he's overcompensating for them both.

"Okay then." Soap's own voice is light. "Why the confession?"

He's never gotten far asking Ghost direct questions, but he isn't one to give up. At least if it didn't concern his parents.

"You were quiet. And it felt like something you might want to know." His next step takes him closer to Soap. Now their elbows brush in explosive scintillating warmth every few seconds.

"There are other ways to goad me into talking."

Ghost rolls his eyes, a precursor to a laugh. None comes. Not yet. "Want to play 20 Questions, Johnny?"

Even though it drips with sarcasm, Soap oh so desperately wants to take him up on that offer. If he took it seriously, Ghost would indulge him. He couldn't guarantee his answers would be true, but he would slip. *No one* is infallible.

"Sure. Why not?" Soap quips.

Ghost chuckles, "Fine, but I'll be counting. You only get 20."

"Deal."

The two had slowed their steps, letting the other two speed a few yards ahead of him. He hadn't even noticed the distance.

Guilt pricks blunt nails into the beating flesh of his heart. Not noticing distance was a problem.

Ghost bumps his shoulder, "20 questions."

"Right," He inhales sharply, holding the breath in his lungs until his heart calms, "Favourite colour?"

Black is the obvious answer.

Ghost's response is quick, "Blue."

"Why's that?"

"That's question number two, Johnny." His response is a warning. Of course he's serious about the actual number of questions, but Soap had asked it. He wasn't going to back out.

"Aye. I know what I said."

Ghost looks around, somehow slowing his steps even more. Soap matches his pace. They're practically crawling now.

"It's a nice colour." At Soap's quirked eyebrow, he stops all together. He turns fully towards him.

"I didn't grow up in the countryside, like you did. I didn't have trees and nature and fresh air. The sky was all I had. On the rare nice day, I'd go as far as I could and stare up at it. It's the same no matter where you go." There's a thick sincerity to his voice and he casts it onto Soap, letting the honesty envelope him like a blanket, knitted from his life experiences. Slowly, Soap was weaving in his own strands.

Soap smiles, a genuine one, shoving aside the stiffness that had followed him since they'd arrived.

"It's also the colour of your eyes." Ghost catches Soap in a quick clothed kiss during the moment his brain short circuits at his confession.

Well hell, now Soap has a new favourite colour too.

Before the bastard can run off, Soap grabs his arm and wheels him around, pulling his massive frame back down to his lips, grabbing the back of his head so he can't escape. They hadn't done this in *days*. How'd he breathe without it?

Ghost makes a surprised grunt as their lips connect. It's the closest thing to squeak a man his size could let out. Soap's brain always burns when he catches the lieutenant by surprise. A testament to this is Ghost hands flying out of his pocket to hang about. Soap uses the moment to flip his mask up and press his lips to Ghost's pink ones. That delicious shock melts away and Ghost's eyes flutter closed.

Soap pulls away. "Nuh uh, keep 'em open."

Ghost sucks in his bottom lip in stubbornness, but ultimately acquiesces to Soap's request. He could get spoiled like this.

Soap kisses along his jaw, using his entire body weight to shove both of them to the nearest tree. Ghost exhales sharply into Soap's face with a grunt.

"Next question." He kisses his neck, nuzzling more of the fabric away so he places his lips and teeth there.

Ghost swallows, the only reaction to the touch. They may be in a public park, but there's no one around. Right now, it's very much private. Maybe the only privacy they'd get.

Soap drags his nose across his jaw and butts it against Ghost's now exposed neck but it's not the temperature that has it sparkling red. That flush was gorgeous. Damn shame the mask covered its frequency.

"How much do I have to do to get you into bed tonight?" He'd get a damn hotel and treat Ghost like a dirty mistress if got them privacy.

"Forward sergeant. Not going to spend some more time sweet talking?" Ghost leans his head back against the tree, staring down at Soap though those glittering blond eyelashes.

"Never been one for words. Actions speak louder." He kisses Ghost softly this time, holding Ghost's cheek and rubbing his thumb under the fabric of his mask.

"Afraid I don't have an answer for your question then." Then, "We're losing your sister." He knocks his head to his right. Sure enough, his sister and her fiancé have turned into pinpricks.

Soap allows himself to the count of five to kiss Ghost before he breaks them apart with a string of spit. The latter swats Soap's hands away when he tries to pull his mask down, doing it himself.

"You're smiling." Ghost notes.

Soap purses his lips into a frown that he can't keep straight.

"That's what this is?" Soap forces a gruffness into his voice. His voice goes deep and rough in every way.

Ghost's chest fills and his next words are breathy, lacking air even as

his chest swells with it, "That's three."

Soap repeats the tone, stepping closer again, "I know how to count." His voice is partly a snarl, betrayed by the smile that tugs at him.

Ghost snorts and clears his throat, pushing him away again, "Let's catch up with your sister."

"Fine."

"And keep it tactical."

Soap bobs his head side to side, pretending to consider the request. "Is that an order?"

"That's four." He shoves his hands back in his pockets, "and never. Not with you."

The sentimentality he imbues in his words catches Soap off guard and he freezes to his spot, letting Ghost walk off without him. He scrambles to catch up.

Even though it wasn't an order, Soap does keep it "tactical." His questions remain PG. Regardless, Ghost was never one for R18. That was Soap's job.

He asks about his haircut. Ghost frequently helps shore up his hair, but he'd never seen the man take shears to his own hair. Ghost rubs his head at the question before admitting that he takes his knife to it whenever it begins to tickle the back of his neck.

He asks about the butcher shirt, a question that had sat on his tongue for months now. Before upending his life for the military, he'd worked at a butcher's shop.

"When did you join the military?" He'd never actually done the math even though he knows the man's birthday now.

"Just turned seventeen," Ghost watches his feet, scuffing along and kicking snow. "Sometimes you just need to get out of the house."

Sounds spur of the moment. Soap thinks. The next question that prickles at the base of his consciousness is one he knows he can't ask.

Ghost never talked about his father aside from the few slips that had him quickly changing the subject, being about as subtle as he had been when they first met Alejandro. He barked the next disjointed

sentence out and acted like he never said anything. So Soap did too. But he wants to ask. It's right there. *What did your father do to you? Why seventeen?* Soap fucked off as soon as he turned sixteen. He'd been ready for it.

Soap grits another question out, unrelated to Ghost's father. This one about favourite book genres. Horror but he prefers short stories of any kind. His answer allows Soap to piece by piece, file away the deeper questions away and instead, create gift lists for birthdays and holidays. Ghost would hate it but he'd also love it.

They catch up with a furious Melanie a few minutes later. Soap had exhausted all but one question by then.

Melanie sits on a bench, blowing on a cup of coffee. Where had she gotten that?

"Nice of the trained military men to finally catch up with us." She stabs, squinting comically at Soap.

Damien does this weird straight smile, sitting up straight. He has two cups in his hands, both steaming just as furiously as Melanie's.

Soap leans back, popping his back in a few places. If Melanie didn't have coffee in her mouth, she definitely would have said something, but she couldn't. Soap had to pounce now.

"Saw a piece of gum stuck to a tree. Mistook it for you."

Melanie recovers quicker than he thought possible, "Makes sense with your IQ." She coughs a bit on the residual coffee but the jesting barb lands anyway. He'd lost before it even began.

"Did you show Damien what you wanted to do?"

"Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first."

"So it is the-"

"Shut the fuck up." She snaps with a giggle, flicking his eyes between Damien and Soap.

Damien, for his part, chokes out his own laugh. He'd been sipping at his own drink and now snorts it into his nose. He coughs, liquid dribbling from his nostrils. His eyes glisten as Ghost slaps him on the back. He'd been mighty open the past few hours. It's still suspicious,

but it was rubbing off on Soap, so he couldn't complain. Yet. It wouldn't last. It never seemed to, for either of them.

"Then chat away."

Melanie slaps her knee, standing with a groan unbecoming of someone her age. The motion reminds her of Price. Ghost's eyes on him tells him he's not the only one.

She slips his arm through his and leads him further down the path. The years and dour weather makes it unrecognizable. It could be any park in any country. He can't conjure the memories of playing football or falling out of trees while drunk. They're there as shadows, nothing tangible enough to grab onto. It's a park.

Melanie looks around, dragging him down specific paths. They're still within sight of the other two no matter where they turn though.

"So," the silence is making his ears ring, "an American."

"So, An Englishman?" She counters.

Soap goes silent. He'd never told Melanie about his...penchant for liking both men and women. Well, anyone really. He followed his heart. Really the biggest flaw here is that he thought he possessed any more subtlety than Ghost.

"He seems nice." She says, "A little odd, but I guess you two match in that way."

"Damien looks like a dog you drag around on a leash." He means it as a compliment. Even as it reminds him of the times she'd tie a jump rope around a stuffed animal's neck and drag it around the house – the consequences of never being allowed to have a real one. He still hadn't decided if that was a good thing or not.

"He's just nervous." She smiles, but the pinch in her brow portrays the seriousness she interprets the question with.

Soap clears his throat, ready to change the conversation again.
Channel Ghost.

"What-"

"How long have you two been together?" She tilts her head to look at him, keeping her voice low so the wind doesn't carry it. There's no

judgement in her voice. Whether the nonchalance is artificial or not, he couldn't tell. Was it manufactured brevity?

"I mean, you let him call you *Johnny*," she snorts, "You almost killed me when I tried that."

"A few months." Nowhere near as long as she'd been with Damien. It's still new. They're still navigating it and it'll get worse once they get back to work. They hadn't even discussed what they'd do when that time came.

"Wow, a world record."

"Not for a lack of trying."

"The mask is something. Please tell me he's bonnie at least."

"Very."

"Prettier than Margaret Bannerman?"

That's a name he hasn't heard in a while. Suddenly he's back as a teenager, standing in front of a pub holding hands with a lass with short blonde hair, swept back behind her ears. At the time, he believed a face like hers was comparable to Greek Heroines that bewitched the likes of gods. How had she chosen him of all people?

But then he remembers Simon's grime covered face in an abandoned house, framed by Soap's own stained hands. He's lying on a rock, watching Simon inhale deeply from a joint, his mask hitched above his nose. Now *that* was temptation in the most Biblical sense.

"Prettier." He confirms.

Melanie whistles. Out of the corner of his eye, Damien and Ghost's heads turn towards them. She waves them off, returning to the conversation at hand.

"I'm glad you're happy then. Though his name is *Simon*, I'd watch out for that."

"Because Damien is such a green flag in comparison."

"He's a dog lover! It cancels out."

Soap laughs, petting it out into sigh, "What are we doing out here?"

She blinks a few times, “I wanted to catch up, outside of that stupid house. It’s like a magazine. Or a parody of one.”

He nods in agreement.

“I also wanted to...” She exhales sharply, “I wanted to apologize for sniping at you, last night. I know you try your best and I don’t make it easy.” Her cheeks colour pink with effort.

But Soap’s burn for a different reason – shame.

“Don’t do that.” He tightens his grip on her arm, “I should call more often. I wouldn’t want to talk to me either.”

“Maybe we both suck.”

“No. It’s just me.”

She looks ready to argue, but visibly bites her tongue.

He’d prodded Ghost so much on being honest and open, but it hadn’t truly struct him how much of a hypocrite that made him.

“We almost died,” He finds himself saying, “That’s why we’re on leave. They dug shrapnel out of my leg and back.” He jerks his head towards Ghost, “He’d been shot pretty much as soon as the mission started. I should have called you then.” He repeats.

Melanie’s eyes widen and shake. The next time she speaks, her voice cracks. “And how often does that happen?”

Soap’s shoulder stings, remembering Graves and Las Almas and even Chicago, “More often than I care to admit.”

God, *Chicago*. He’d only been a few states away from Melanie and he hadn’t even shot her a text. No, he had to sit in his hotel room near hyperventilating because his head wouldn’t stop throbbing from the hit from the gun butt. Every time he closed his eyes, he was falling out of that damn window. Then he’d hopped up and headed to the pub with everyone else like nothing happened. Drinks that night had helped ease the ache. Like his sister used to.

“Well now I firmly agree you’re 100% at fault.” There’s some underlying sense of a joke in those words but she can’t help the seething quickly growing anger that laces them. It ignites every scar on Soap’s body with flame, beginning for defensiveness. His muscles

flex, preparing for a punch to the gut that would never come. Defend and fight back, that's what he knows.

"I barely function in those moments." He's guilted her but the effect just bounces off her and lands straight back on him, sucking away like a parasite. The pain urges him on.

"You're flipping on me?" She slides her arm out of his.

"No," Yes, he is. Because Melanie doesn't look like him now. She looks like their mother. Judging and hurting. The only difference is that this is real. It isn't manufactured to get what she wants.

"Fine. Maybe it is better you don't call me then. God forbid you have someone in your corner. But I guess that's what you do best. Rush in and consequences be damned."

She walks off, away from Ghost and Damien. Away from *him*.

A sick part of him envies Ghost. Simon Riley, the man with no family. A sick vicious part of him hisses *Good. Cut them off now.*

"Wait, Mel!" He barks.

She stops. Thank God she stops.

"I'm working on it." He says.

"Therapy then?"

He's silent.

"Right then." She runs her hands through her hair.

"Ghost and I aren't therapy people. Honesty, mostly. Trying not to be so closed off."

"Hand me your phone." She doesn't wait for him to say anything before she shoves her hand in his pockets, searching for the stupid device.

"What's your password?" Again, she doesn't wait before she unlocks it.

"What the fuck?" He breathes out.

She opens his alarms and sets about putting something in for midnight on Fridays. She stuffs the phone back where it had been before he can

read the name on it. "Unless you're under fire or anything, you call as soon as that alarm goes off. I'll set one for a different day, just to keep us both accountable. Especially since I know how prone to dying you are now."

"I'm not prone-"

She presses a finger to the scar on his chin, pushing his head back.

"You're fucking annoying, you know that?"

"You can tell me about it during our calls. You can spill confidential details and I can wedding plan." It's the first time she's brought up the wedding on her own.

Soap sees this as his chance to make amends, "Does he make you happy?"

He already knows the answer by the way she dips her head into her scarf.

"He took me to Build-A-Bear on our third date." She fiddles with the tassels on the end of her scarf, "He didn't even kiss me till the fifth one because he was nervous I didn't like him back."

"That's disgustingly sweet."

"It's what made his proposal even more shocking. We were watching a movie, preparing for the hangovers we were going to have the next day and he just...put a ring box in my hand." She holds her hand up, flexing her fingers so Soap can see said ring. It's a small steel band with a green gem set into it. "I think it's glass. He got it from some department store, somehow completely under my nose!"

She holds it to her chest as if it were the most precious thing in the world. With the way it makes her eyes sparkle, Soap believes it. To him, it's more valuable than anything.

He pulls her into a side hug, "Congratulations, Mel. Even if it's a few months late."

"I want you to be my maid of honour. Even if you are a lavvy heid who pisses me off just as badly as mother."

"Isn't that the type of people who are supposed to be in wedding parties?"

"If mum is anything to go by. Yes." She rolls her eyes, "She wants me to choose a more 'lady-like' option."

"She doesn't think I'd look good in a bridesmaid's dress?"

"Apparently not." She rubs her eyes, "I'm this close to freezing her out of planning all together."

"She'd kill you."

"That's why I haven't. As much of a twat she's being, I still want to be married. I want a day all about me and Damien. I want to celebrate *us*."

"I'll get some family leave and visit you so we can get this done."

"How long can you get?" Her eyes light up.

"As long as I need. Price and I are close and he'll be happy for you, even if he doesn't know you. He's a big softy." He says that last part quietly, like the old man might hear him even a country away.

Melanie smiles so widely that her grin stretches above her gums, "I've already have some outfit ideas! And there's flowers, don't know what to do with those yet. And I love, *love*, Damien, but he's all 'whatever you want' or 'as you wish'."

"What an ass." He says with a smile.

"He's just devoted." And she says it with such reverence that Soap almost sprints back to kiss Damien himself. He'd done a shit job keeping her company, but Damien hadn't. Instead he tucks her under his arm, steering her back onto the path.

"You'll need to send me those outfit ideas so I can judge you. That's what a maid of honour does, right?"

"I think. Or you hold my hair while I vomit from nerves."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

They circle around to where they can see the others again. He waves and seemingly before he can control it, Ghost waves back. Even he seems at a loss as his hand hangs beside him.

They thought they were being quiet, but an empty park carries a lot

through it without much effort.

The fight hadn't even been a big one, only a few barbed words, but it's enough.

"Simon!" Someone snaps directly in front of his face.

His body screams at him to move. Instead, he blinks, focusing in on whoever had roused him from his dissociation.

Tommy stands in front of him, light brows pinched deeply above his eyes.

"What?" Simon barks. He needs to clear his throat, but it is amazing enough he could speak in the first place.

"Mum's been trying to get your attention for the last five minutes."

"Lay off your brother, Tommy!" His mother calls from the kitchen.

Tommy rolls his eyes, like he isn't a full grown adult. "She wants to know if you want a cup of tea."

"No."

"He said he'll take a cup."

"I said-"

"Come off it." Tommy hisses, "Mum just wants to do something nice for you since you've been moping around."

"I haven't-"

"Yes you have. It's been months since you've got back. Can't you just smile?"

Simon digs his nails into his knees. His feet have gone numb from sitting on them. "I have-"

"No you-"

"Can you stop interrupting me? For fuck's sake! I'm fine! I don't need tea or you and mum playing nurse."

"How's counseling going then?"

Tommy needs to get that smug look out of Simon's face or he's going to

strangle him. Just squeeze until he stops fucking talking. He may have grown, but he's still that same kid who took their shithead father's side. Stop crying, Simon, you big baby? Don't you want to be a man one day?

His brother's face softens, "Sorry...I shouldn't have...I'm sorry." He reaches out.

Simon swats his hand away, smacking it hard.

He shakes his hand out, cursing, "Get over yourself. What if that had been Joseph?"

Ice settles in Simon's core, freezing his mouth shut.

"Beth and I can watch him tonight." He snaps.

"No, I'm good. I just don't want tea."

"Have you ever wondered why your quack won't let you go back to work? Your fucking impossible, Simon. 'I'm fine' and 'I'm good'? Fucking seriously?"

"Mum said lay off."

"How fucking old are you?" Tommy stands, slapping his thighs in exasperation. "Christ," He pinches his nose before apologizing again. "Take the night for yourself. Beth can find someone to take her shift and I have some sick days."

"I know my situation and yours aren't the same," Tommy starts, "but I never would have made it if I didn't accept your help. I moved where you told me to. I got a new job."

Simon leans back. Of course it was going here. When did it not?

"Take the discharge. There's a dog shelter near Beth's work looking for people."

"I'm going to wait this out," Simon follows their usual script.

"You almost died!" Tommy grabs his knees and it takes everything in him to not kick his brother, "When's the last time you had a solid night of sleep?"

"Last night."

"No. You almost gave me a black eye when I tried to wake you. You were screaming and choking. You are not okay. Just stay home. You've done

your duty. Don't let them take more from you." Tommy stares up at him with pleading eyes.

"No offense, Tommy," he bites his brother's name out, "But I need the work."

"You need to almost die? Didn't get enough of it wherever they found you? You're addicted."

"You don't know anything about me -"

"Simon?" A gruffer voice calls to him.

When Ghost looks around, it's just him and Soap. He's on a park bench, not a rotting sofa. He's in Glasgow, not Manchester.

"Where's your sister?"

"They went back to the car. But I still have some things I want to show you. Come on." He grabs Ghost's forearm and hauls him up easily. Soap was probably the second strongest person in their unit and he never let anyone forget it, least of all Ghost, especially in the bedroom.

"Whatever your sister buried?"

"Yes. I just have to remember exactly where it was." In that moment, Soap turns into a bloodhound, searching around trees, looking at landmarks – benches, children's playground equipment, water fountains – and touching his hands to trees, as if they would speak to him and tell him the secrets of the past. He pulls Ghost through the entire park, a blessing in disguise. The air is cool and fresh, pricking the skin on the back of his neck. And if he squints, he can pretend he is back at work. Everyday it becomes harder to keep a consistent mood. Soap was beginning to notice and hopefully, he would chalk it up to his own bad mood instead of anything wrong with Ghost. At work, it's easier. You're allowed to work yourself to the bone, carry exhaustion with you to bed and let it chase away any inklings of dreaming. Here, where there is nothing to do but relax, there is no defense against the past. Even Soap was slipping as an anchor. As he embraces his own past, Ghost loses his grip on the present.

"Here." Soap bends down at the base of a tree, brushing away bits of frozen dirt. After a quick look around to see that they're alone, he begins to dig.

“What exactly did she bury here?” Not dog tags. A tree. Not a gravestone.

“You don’t like surprises?”

"Not particularly."

Soap bites the inside of his cheek, staring at Ghost's knees for a small moment. Then he goes back to digging. He digs a much bigger hole than he would have expected for a public park. Ghost finds himself leaning over to get a better look. What had Melanie buried that she didn't want anyone to know about, even her future husband?

After a while, Soap pulls out a black case, about the size his two hands cupped together. It's scuffed and covered in dirt, but most notably, it has a bright orange sticker on it, mostly rubbed off.

He pulls the lid off to reveal a Polaroid camera. Soap holds it up with a grin.

"Melanie's pirate treasure." Underneath the camera is a stack of Polaroids. They're dirty and water damaged but the moment Soap pulls one out, their images are clear.

A young boy and girl are pressed side to side with their index and middle fingers held up, palms facing towards them. The girl, Melanie, has her hair cut short and put up into two puff ball ponytails. The boy, Soap, has longer hair, parted down the middle and sweeping past the top of his ears and curling around his chin. Both frown at the camera, but even with the water damage, the fight to keep the frowns are evident.

Ghost takes the photo, tilting it side to side to get a better look at the details. “What exactly makes this a shameful secret?”

Soap pulls out another photo, this of him drinking, a blonde girl with a near identical haircut to him sits half in his lap. “It’s stolen.”

Ghost raises an eyebrow.

“Not really,” Soap sits back in the dirt, shuffling through the photos, “But she thinks it is. Melanie, Mags, and a few other friends of ours were pub hopping and we stopped into a charity shop. Melanie had blown pretty much all her money and I told her I wasn’t going to buy her anything. She was distraught when she couldn’t purchase this bonnie thing. She went outside to pout and I bought it for her.”

“But you weren’t about to let her know that.”

“Of course not. After I paid for it, I ran out with it under my arm and told our friends to run. We got pissed in this park afterwards taking pictures.”

“Mags is the girl?”

“Margaret Bannerman. But yeah.” He holds the camera up and presses the button, making the sound of a shutter clicking. To both men’s surprise, the camera does make a noise. It continues to whirl as it prints out a blackened photo.

“I didn’t think this thing had any life left in it.” He pulls the photo out and shakes it slightly, speeding up the development process. The resulting photo is blurry and the colours are blown out. Ghost’s skin comes out impossibly whiter than it already is and the contrast of his mask is upped to an extreme level, giving the skull decal a ghostly glow. Even the perspective is off, giving Ghost’s stature an even more imposing height.

“Well what are you going to do with this information?” Ghost hands the photo back.

“I’m going to bury it. Maybe come back years later and be surprised all over again.”

“Going to bring another fuck buddy to take photos with?” It’s all in good fun that Ghost says this.

Soap tucks some of the photos into his coat pocket, “I don’t think I’d be able to get you to pose for anything.”

Aside from a blush across his cheeks, he doesn’t react to the implications of his words. Years later and Soap thinks they’ll still be together. What does that even mean? Ghost’s boots melt into the ground.

“Come on, get down here.” Soap tugs on Ghost’s sleeve, bringing him down to his level. “Pull the mask up.”

Ghost does so with shaking hands, Johnny’s words bouncing around his brain. Years Later. If Soap notices, he doesn’t comment. He just grabs onto Ghost’s newly exposed chin and pulls his lips to his. Ghost’s eyes are wide as the camera flashes and prints out a gauzy recreation of their faces squished together. He sees this out of the corner of his

eye because Soap doesn't break the kiss. He sets the camera down, moving his hand to slide it across Ghost's sweating neck.

Years later. Commitment.

Soap pulls back, both hands on his cheeks, "What's wrong?"

Nothing sits right on the tip of his tongue, but so does the taste of Soap. He still hasn't decided whether it's a good idea to bring up the new bout of turmoil raging through him. He doesn't want to be the person who's emotions seem to flip on a dime.

He takes too long to respond.

"Ghost?"

"I'm just thinking. Overreacting." Nothing said any other way would smell of just as much bullshit and Soap is ever the bloodhound.

"What did I say?" Soap fully sits back now.

"I think this is a conversation best held in private. *Actual* privacy." The distance would also allow Ghost to collect his thoughts on why Soap's implication of long-term commitment has him upset. If they talked about it now, Ghost's words would be jumbled and he'd end up freezing Soap out instead of holding an honest conversation.

"Tonight then."

"I'll be there."

Soap buries the camera again, making sure his carefully selected photos are safe in his pocket. "Let's get going before Mel leaves us to walk back."

"Where to next then?"

He shrugs, "I don't know. This is Melanie's nostalgia trip."

Melanie did indeed want to go back to their old school. Like the park, it's smaller than he remembers. He desperately wants to see the inside and check out all the rooms he'd ever napped in, but they stop short of breaking in. If it were just Soap and Ghost or even Soap and Melanie, they would have. But with four people, they didn't want to risk it. That was fine with Soap because he would have been too distracted watching Ghost. Ever since finding the Polaroid, he'd

reverted back to a stoic silence, hands hidden in his pockets.

He's still silent even as they file back to the car, driving back to their old childhood home. Melanie tells stories about her time in school, all ones that Soap knows and by the looks of it, even Damien, but he nods along as if they are brand new.

Ghost slumps in his seat, staring out the window. He could just be getting carsick, but this had started long before this. And all Soap can think, in the most selfish way possible, is he did this. He'd open his stupid mouth and ruined the good humour Ghost had found himself in. He tried and Soap just had to push it.

He bumps his shoulder. Ghost looks over at him, first sliding his eyes then fully turning his head.

"What is a vampire's favourite fruit?"

Ghost doesn't turn away.

"A blood orange."

He nods, "Good one."

"I try."

His father holds up a letter, "What is this?"

John grabs it, noticing his name on the front of the open letter.

"Why did you open this?"

"I asked you a question first." His father snaps. "You're dropping out? To do what, John? This?" He points towards the letter.

He hadn't had the chance to read it but the logo printed at the top told him enough to know why his father was pissed. Her Majesty's Military had gotten back to him about basic training. He'd need to start packing.

"That sounds like more than one question." John stands straight, bringing his arms close to his side. His own version of shrinking into himself.

"Watch your tone." He takes a sip of his coffee, letting his son stew under his angry gaze. "You are going to contact them and tell them you changed your mind."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're not dropping out of school to join the military."

"It's what I want to do and they make good money."

"It's grunt work, John. For the brainless and the poor. I know your marks aren't the best, but they aren't that terrible. You could still get into school. Even play football like you wanted."

"I've made a commitment." His father would have to respond positively to that.

"Not a serious one. I know that daft cousin of yours," Your wife's nephew, "put this idea in your brain. And I admire the work he does, but it isn't for you."

"How do you know?"

"It just isn't. Why are you arguing?"

"Because it's my life? It's up to me what I want to do with it."

"You're only sixteen, John. How could you possibly know?"

"Would you say that if this letter was for university?" He bites, waving the letter between them.

"The old haunt," Melanie pulls over onto the curb, "Look at that piece shit." She nods her head over to the house on their left. It's one storey and far from a piece of shit. The yard has been well maintained by whoever is taking care of it. Even the trees have been taken care of with smaller branches towards their bases trimmed away. Blankets are tucked over the flowerbeds, protecting whatever is planted within them from frost and freezing rain. It'd been painted. Instead of the white house they had grown up in, it's been painted a spring sage green, with equally green wreaths hung above the front door and windows. A single truck sits out front. The curtains in most of the windows are pulled open, letting in the day. Only one that he can see is closed. Soft white curtains block his view from what used to be his room. How many times had he snuck out that window?

"It's nice." Damien compliments. He leans his head out the window to get a better look. "Are we going up there to knock?"

“Probably best if we don’t.” She sighs, “We could walk around the woods behind it. Find that old hunting blind we’d drink at.”

“Did you guys do anything but drink?” It’s the first thing Ghost has said since Soap’s joke.

“Yeah, but most of those places have closed down and been replaced by hipster cafes and tourist traps for Americans. No offense.”

“None taken. Besides, I have my own guide.”

“Are there any more buried secrets there?” Ghost mumbles. He isn’t trying to be quiet and genuinely trying to make conversation after brooding the entire car ride.

Melanie’s head whips towards him, then towards Soap, “You showed him?” Her voice squeaks in indignation.

“Showed him what?” Soap raises his eyebrows in innocence. The photos in his pocket burn.

“No,” she adjusts her white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, “No buried secrets. Let’s just get on with it.”

Damien rubs her shoulder, unsure whether Melanie is seriously upset by Soap’s apparent betrayal. He himself isn’t even sure. He’s oh-for-two on keeping the people he loves happy.

Melanie pulls off the shoulder and drives around, looking for a better spot to park before they make their journey through the woods. They’ll be going into the same place he took Ghost yesterday, but coming from a completely different angle.

Like then, Ghost hangs at the back, stepping carefully through the snow, avoiding sticks and following in everyone else’s footprints. His head is on a swivel.

“Hey,” Soap falls back, “We’re safe here. We’re not in Russia.”

Ghost’s eyes widen, like he hadn’t been all there before Soap bumped into him. They may have to move that talk up if he’s going to backslide into his behavior from October.

“I know that.”

“Then why do you look like you’re five seconds away from dodging sniper fire?”

“Too soon, Johnny.”

“Okay, I know we said we’d talk about this later, but you’re scaring me. Last night, you’re flailing in your sleep. Then this morning you’re joking and flirting like a schoolgirl and now you look ready to curl in on yourself and cry.” Or more accurately, shut down entirely, like a robot without power.

“Is this about Melanie and Damien? I know it’s been a lot of socializing and people pleasing, but-”

“It’s not them Soap.” He says softly, “It’s just me. I’ll be solid until we get back to your parents’ house.”

I won’t. “Alright.”

Ghost sighs and pulls Soap into his side, tucking him under his arm. “You need a better poker face.”

“So do you.”

Ghost kisses his head. Even though his hat blocks a lot of the physical sensation, it doesn’t hide the tingle it sends down his back. It’s the sign of a truly magical person that even when they are obviously miserable, they can still make you smile, even if it’s always tinged with the slightest hint of sadness knowing they can’t give that happiness to themselves.

“You know you can do this more often,” Soap comments, “Melanie knows. About the two of us.” For a moment, he regrets telling him. So far, he’d been the one hiding that they were together but he hadn’t asked what Ghost wanted to do about any of this. He hadn’t complained though. But maybe that’s why he looks like a decomposing grape right now.

“Okay.”

Nothing.

The hunting blind is father than he remembers it being. They walk for around twenty minutes by Soap’s best estimate. The time could be completely thrown off by the fact that Ghost’s arm doesn’t leave his shoulders, a heavy hanging warmth. He could get used to this.

“Are you going to take me on a tour of Manchester at some point? Show me all the spots you used to hang out at?” He prods, trying to

bring back that good mood. He'd pulled Soap's miserable head out of his ass with just a few small words. Why couldn't Soap?

"Unless you want to see a single stone wall, I've got nothing for you."

"What would you do there?"

"Get high."

"With that...footballer you mentioned?"

"Yes."

Soap slaps Ghost's thigh, "You bastard! I didn't know you knew how to have fun!"

"I have loads of fun."

He doesn't sound like he's joking.

"What? At work?"

"You don't?"

"Of course I have fun, just didn't think you did. You're always 'let's get this done' and 'keep it tactical'."

"You're not very observant then."

"Apparently not."

Ghost pulls him in tighter, "Come on, we're slagging behind and I don't want to get chewed out by your sister again."

—

He'd lied. He was a big fat liar.

Ghost is torturing Soap, but the man would bounce back faster if he didn't drag him into that conversation yet. The truth he'd told was that he was overreacting. He was. Soap sometimes spoke without speaking, his heart moving faster than his brain. The likelihood of anything he said having any significant merit is low but Ghost had learned to never underestimate anyone, no matter how aloof or daft they might seem. Not that his Johnny was either of these things, but the concept remains the same. At least in these moments he could hold Soap, like now. There's some comfort in the present that he can cling to. Fuck worrying about the future or the past. He'd spent too long doing that and Soap had finally pulled him out of it.

But he wasn't dancing around the topic, just putting it off for a better time. He could talk to Soap. he always could, no matter how much it ripped into his mind with claws, chastising him for opening up at all and letting someone else care for him the way his brother and mother had.

Melanie squeals before continuing in a sing-song voice, "We're here! Ah, look at this place. It's like we never left. John, you can see our house through the trees. How did mum and dad never see us?"

"They're good at ignoring things they don't like." He grumbles.

Ghost squeezes his shoulder.

"Right. What's the plan here Mel?" He changes course.

"You know, I don't know." She inhales deeply, "I just wanted to visit home. You know with the wedding and school, I've missed it. That stupid house isn't home."

Damien steps over to comfort her, putting his arm over shoulders in a similar way to Ghost.

Soap tugs on his arm.

"You don't want to stay?" Ghost asks in a whisper.

Soap shakes his head, "We'd just end up in an argument. Besides, it's not anything I don't know. Let's head this way. There's some more private woods over this way." He waves to Melanie and she nods with red-rimmed eyes.

For the second time that day, they leave the happy couple in seclusion and Ghost trails after like a lost puppy. More like a feral cat following the one person he lets feed him.

"If I didn't know better, sergeant, I'd think you were taking me out here to kill me." He fails to give the same lightness to his tone as he had that morning, but it's better than nothing.

"Like I could do that." Soap snorts, leaning back against a tree.

"Wanna tell me what's wrong?"

"We talked about this."

Soap holds his hands up, "I know. But, please do it for me. I can't help Melanie right now, but I can help you. Just tell me, please?"

Christ's sake, Soap is begging him. He may not be on his knees pulling on his pants leg, but it hurts none-the-less. Ghost steps in close, afraid his words might carry as Soap and Melanie's had earlier.

"Back at the park, you said you would probably come back years later. I asked-"

"If I would bring my current fuck buddy when that happened. Yeah?"

"You said you'd struggle to get me to pose for pictures."

Soap swallows, "Ah."

"Yeah." Ghost hides his hands in his pockets. He should have brought his gloves but he didn't think he'd need them.

"Do you...want to pose for pictures?"

"Bloody hell, this isn't-"

"I know." Soap steps away from the tree, "I know what this is about. Don't take what I said too seriously. I've barely made relationships last this long so I try not to make plans."

"Right. Of course."

"Not that I'm planning on breaking up with you-"

"Obviously not, Johnny."

They stop and stare at each other. How the fuck do people have conversations like this? They're awkward as all hell. Give him a sniper rifle and a Infil plan and he's set. That's infinitely more simple.

"So, you're worried that I thought this could last but you know I'm not planning on leaving you. I'm confused."

"That's why I wanted to have this conversation later when I knew what was really bothering me. I'm not used to having to spell out my feelings. Usually I'd just tell Price to fuck off and sit in the dark. I didn't *have* anybody. What you said, panicked me?" Fucking hell, what is he even saying?

"You've been moody because you realized someone cared about you?" His tone is far from judging. It's incredulous and concerned, but not judging.

"I wouldn't put it exactly like that. Like I said, Price can be a right prat about things once he sinks his teeth into them. I've never had the luxury to entertain the future and you seem like you did." The words are still spaghetti in his brain. Nothing he says makes any sense to him.

"Well, I'm giving you the luxury. Does the idea of this maybe making it past at least a year suck that much?" He chuckles, but it lacks mirth. Ghost had only succeeded in making him feel worse.

But his words do conjure images of nights spent on Soap's shitty couch with a homecooked meal between them. Of more holiday parties with Price and Gaz. There's hope and happiness there and better Christmases that don't end in blood.

"It doesn't seem like it does." Soap says. "We're both kind of new to this, it makes sense we're a little nervous."

"Yeah." Ghost nods.

"We're good then? Neither of us are jonesing to get married like Mel and Damien back there. Steamin' Jesus, it's only been a few months."

"Doesn't feel like it."

"No, I guess it doesn't. But I don't think that's a bad thing."

"So let's just summarize. I make an off-handed joke about taking pictures of you and you get freaked out about commitment despite the fact that you came with me to meet my parents."

Ghost shifts his weight from his left foot to his right, "Yes."

"Got it. We'll just ignore that word from now on and keep going like we have been. You know, I've had a good day because of you. I didn't think it was possible after being under the same roof as my parents but you made me smile. You always have, even if you can't see it."

"I do see them. Back in Las Almas, I always tried to get a look at you after telling a joke, but you always seemed to be inside." There, the reason why this relationship has felt longer than months. And Soap knows it too.

"What else did you stare at?" Soap steps in close to him.

"Mainly the wet pavement. You did a fine job of staying out of sight."

“Was that a compliment regarding my stealth skills?”

“Not as good as me, but a fine job.”

“Now who’s a prat?” Soap lifts his mask up again and kisses him. It doesn’t have the shock from before and what makes it even better is that he isn’t worried over anything now. Any plans he’d made for the future had been dashed the moment he started believing in them, so he stopped making plans. Just get back to work, hibernate during leave, then back to work, a never ending cycle. He didn’t think a man like him could get a beginning or end. Soap’s words had disrupted what he knew about his cycle of life.

“Hey,” Soap brushes his cheek, “Stay here, with me. We just talked about this, aye. Same as always.”

“Who told you I wasn’t here?” To prove a point, he dips back down for another kiss, grabbing onto the back of Soap’s head.

“I was mistaken.” He mumbles against Ghost’s lips.

—

Stupid, silly, fucking Ghost. Leave it to him to get worried not about being broken up with, but having a relationship that lasts.

Soap grabs onto his hips, knowing there’s probably more to this than being worried about commitment. But they’ll take the good while they have it. They are also in a pretty secluded spot, definitely more secluded than the guest room back in Dundee. They did agree to keep things the same and what better way to do that than this?

Soap’s hands are cold and Ghost’s stomach is oh so warm. The other man hisses as the cold sweeps under his shirt. He probably wants to say something like we’re doing this here? But he can’t very well talk when Soap’s got his face glued to his. And when he does pull back, he doesn’t give Ghost the time to speak, “This is where I took all the girls.”

“Naughty, MacTavish.”

“Only naughty if we get caught.” Soap whirls Ghost around, no easy feat, but one he’s practiced a lot in the last few months. As soon as the behemoth’s back hits the tree Soap had just been leaning on. He drops his lips to Simon’s collar bone, kissing the exposed skin there. His hands are still underneath his shirt, rubbing circles into the fat there.

He loves doing that, just pressing into him and knowing that he doesn't have to stop as well as knowing that as many problems as Ghost has, at least he's not neglecting his health. Not once did he turn up his nose at anything Soap made for dinner.

"Soap..." His voice rings as a playful warning with no heat. That's the man he's looking for today

"I'm not doing anything." He moves his hands to the small of Ghost's back. "What was it you said a few months ago? It makes me feel good which makes you feel good?"

"Bloody fucking hell. Come on then." Ghost throws his head back with a large smile, sucking in that beautiful bottom lip of his.

Soap drops to his knees with a wicked smile.

He knew Melanie would wait for him in the car. She looks up from her phone, watching Soap wipe his face with a grin. The way she blanches tells him he can't blame the cold for his red and swollen lips. Once inside the car, he coughs before speaking, "Headed home?"

Melanie coughs, turning her head away from the rearview mirror. Poor little Damien is oblivious, even as Ghost buckles himself in. "We're stopping for food, but yeah."

"Anything that keeps us from mum's cooking." Soap buckles his seatbelt, "Let's get on with it."

Chapter End Notes

I hate the dialogue this chapter. Can you tell I'm an asexual who has never been in a relationship?

(honestly been struggling with writing these past few weeks but I want to write so bad! I want to know where this story is going just as badly as some of you)

i am not what you've made of me, your pressure makes my stomach bleed

Chapter Summary

Playlist

This chapter title comes from the song Pretty in Pink by Scene Queen

Chapter Notes

tw: depictions of homophobia and discussions of child abuse

Early update because I have a really busy week coming up and since the chapter is done, why not?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Soap's parents weren't happy with the fact that their children had taken off for the entire day and came back already fed. Ghost's father would have been thrilled had it been him. If there was an entire day where he didn't come home and then kept himself from being a problem, he'd be ecstatic. If you'd asked him then what he would have preferred, he would have chosen the parents who cared where he was. Seeing it now, he almost preferred his father's treatment to what Soap's parents were doing.

Diane had cleaned up the unused table settings, pushing away any attempts to help. It was a loud affair, silverware clinking against each other and the sink constantly going, despite the lack of dirty dishes. Even in another room, the cacophony is grating. Ghost grinds his teeth. If he found it in himself to visit a dentist, they'd have some choice words to say.

Now they all sit in the living space. Melanie, Damien, and Diane sit on the sofa, Ghost and Soap on the matching loveseat, and Matthew on the armchair. Everyone stares at each other in silence. There weren't many topics that naturally came up after a guilt trip. Diane had suggested they play a board game of sorts, but even Matthew hadn't supported that. He poured himself a glass of wine and sat in his plush armchair.

"Day two and I feel like we haven't gotten to know you, Ghost." He says, swirling the red liquid in his tall glass. He hadn't offered anyone

else anything.

"If *Ghost*," Diane still chokes on his callsign, "Wanted to share, he would have. We shouldn't go poking around where we are obviously not wanted." She pulls his legs up under her, once again wearing soft lounge pants and a selectively large sweater.

Judging by the way Melanie and Soap stiffen, her words had struck in more than one way. On the drive back over coffee and car food, Melanie, Damien, and Soap had talked about the still undated wedding. The one she didn't want to share with her mother.

Tommy nudges his shoulder, "You'll be standing at my side right?"

"I thought you two were keeping it small." Simon sips from his tea, trying not to spill any on the plethora of papers and pamphlets on the kitchen table. Beth takes a pencil out of her mouth and uses it to twist her dark hair up.

"You can still have a wedding party and keep it small, the two aren't mutually exclusive, Simon." She says before grabbing one of the pamphlets and dragging it over to her, "A woman I work with is a youth counselor at this church, she'd be able to help us schedule."

Tommy leans over to look at it before giving a hearty whistle, "It looks nice. Would we be able to afford it?"

Simon sets his cup down, "I told you not to worry about that."

"If I leave all the worrying to you, you'll die before the wedding." Tommy bites his thumb. It's a new habit he's picked up since he quit smoking, which replaced the heroin. Beth reaches out and soothes him, rubbing his shoulder. She has no ring on her finger.

"Who told you I'm worried?"

"Ghost." Soap nudges his knee.

"Yeah, Sorry. What did you say?"

Diane fixes her frown, "I asked how you slept last night. I didn't see you on the couch this morning."

“Slept fine. Took an early morning jog.”

“Ah,” Matthew sips his wine, “Always on the grind. I remember early college days, studying till the early morning, sleeping for an hour, then running until my classes started.” He reaches out for Diane’s hand, holding her delicate fingers in his own. She still wears her silver engagement ring, a large diamond-looking rock. A gold wedding band sits just under it. She didn’t seem like the type of person to mix metals.

“I also didn’t see your things,” He continues. He’s fishing. The comments left unsaid between them on the first day had not been forgotten.

“They’re in the guest room with Johnny’s bag.” Sprinkle in a grain of truth to the lies. Ghost didn’t mind the fact that Melanie knew him and Soap were together. He wouldn’t even mind if Soap’s parents knew, but Johnny hadn’t volunteered that information so Ghost wouldn’t either. “I figured they would be out of the way there.”

“Well,” Matthew clears his throat, “I hope it isn’t too much trouble for either of you.”

“Not at all.” Ghost tilts his head to the side, watching the other man’s reaction.

Oliver enters the room with a huff and a thump of his tail against the dining room door. He runs around, sniffing everyone’s feet as dogs are wont to do before launching himself at Ghost.

“Oliver!” Diane squeals, followed by a sharp whistle and a slap to her knee. The dog doesn’t listen as he struggles to turn in circles on the crowded loveseat and finally settles onto Ghost’s lap, hanging his head off his knee.

Diane whistles again, “I am so sorry. He’s always bothering guests.”

“It’s no problem.” It gives him something to do with his hands. Even Soap finds some comfort in it, reaching over and running his fingers over Oliver’s head. His fur is soft and well-loved. If Ghost were a more optimistic person, he would guess that they really loved this dog and wanted him to live a long happy life. In reality, they probably don’t want a dirty dog on their furniture. Even now, Diane’s eyes are on the dog, simultaneously wide and narrow, afraid he might soil the loveseat. Ghost scratches his hind quarters. If Oliver decided that Ghost was his favourite, he might as well embrace it.

Melanie's hand has been on her phone the entire time, but she hadn't found the strength to actually pull it out and use it to hide from the situation they'd found themselves in. Six pairs of eyes just staring at each other as the streetlamps come on outside. If he had anything positive to say about his family, it was that they never had these awkward moments.

"What did you two do for the holidays?" Matthew breaks the silence again. It's unclear whether he means Soap and Melanie or Soap and Ghost.

"We spent them with Damien's parents." Melanie answers with a grip of her phone. This finally gives her the confidence to unlock the thing. She swipes for a few seconds before handing the phone over to her mother.

"Oh look at you!" She coos and shows the photos to Matthew. "Oh isn't she just gorgeous, Mattie?"

"As braw as her mother."

"Well what about you two?" Diane asks, but she continues to keep her focus on the pictures Melanie provided. Fine by Ghost.

"Had a few friends over." Soap pulls his feet under him in a mirror image of his mother. He doesn't seem to notice the similarity, even as he adjusts his body to press closer into Ghost's side. "I cooked and we toasted."

"Who'd you invite?" Matthew's eyes light up, intrigued at the prospect of his son having more friends than the masked man in front of him. If only he knew his real relationship to Johnny.

"Ghost, Price, Gaz, Ntombi. We video chatted with some friends in America and Mexico. We made it through."

Matthew nods along with each name, but no recognition crosses his features. He's a blank mannequin.

Oh, but one of the names isn't lost on Diane. She zeroes in before Soap can even realize he'd said anything. "Ntombi?"

"Gaz's girlfriend."

Her face falls. Soap might as well have kicked a puppy.

“Well it sounds lonely,” She nods, holding her hands to her chest, “It’s a shame you couldn’t make it home to spend the holidays with loved ones.”

“I was with loved ones.”

Diane looks to Matthew for support. He nods to her. “Of course you were, I just meant family. Oh, I’m just saying everything wrong. I just feel like I don’t know how to talk to you two anymore.” Then she covers her mouth with a dainty hand, “I’m so sorry, Ghost and Damien. I shouldn’t be bringing this up. You two are so far from home-”

“Speaking of home,” Matthew interrupts, “Ghost you’re a Londoner. What kept you from spending the holidays with your family?”

“ ‘M from Manchester.” Ghost croaks.

“My apologies.” He blinks, waiting for an answer to his original question. He has this way of staring that is simultaneously friendly and demanding. He wasn’t going to verbally press, but he also wasn’t going to let it go.

It shouldn’t be this hard. They’re dead. Two simple words. It would shut everything down. But would they ask? Could he spin the truth to make it not his fault?

Ghost’s face flushes hot and his mask turns from security blanket to burial shroud. Is Ghost blinking too much? Could they see it? Oh they can smell it like sharks in the water, the blood on his hands. They sense the intruder in their midst, the fox in the henhouse, the wolf in sheep’s clothing coming to rip and tear their family apart. He swallows down a rumble on his throat, a precursor to throwing up but it would never happen. The pounding of drums and gunshots. What’s keeping him from his family? The veil between heaven and hell.

"Ghost." He's fully aware of Soap trying to talk to him. He's all too aware of everything. Everyone's staring at him. He can't hide in a shadow, in a corner, behind a gun.

Ghost rubs his knee, "They passed, a few years ago now."

Matthew nods his head again, as if to say *ah, everything makes sense about you now*. If he keeps nodding his head, that small condensed brain of his might bust out his skull.

The muscles in Ghost's throat wobble.

"Were your parents old?" Diane tilts her head to the side like a fucking dog. Her hair shifts around her shoulders, weighing her head down.

"No." With his father, you couldn't tell in the end. But he never grieved that bastard. But his mother...she'd married young, had kids young. Tommy and Beth were young. Joseph was young. Too much *was* in that train of thought, barreling forth with speed and blood. His thigh throbs from the place Washington had managed to get a bullet into.

"That's such a shame. I bet they were...wonderful people? Right. Absolutely wonderful."

"Any siblings?" Matthew throws the question at him like a dart.

"Yes."

His ears ring. This isn't a living room, it's a shitty psychiatrist office and this is his intake form. *Alcohol Use? Smoking? Illicit Drugs? Feelings of worry? Suicidal ideation?*

"They've also passed?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you need this more than I do." He raises his glass, swirling the wine inside.

He almost says yes again, lost in the pattern.

Poor little orphan boy with the dead family. It explains the mask and gruff attitude. We know everything about you now. We know you.

If they could see his face, they'd see the stone it becomes. Simon's eyes unfocus, turning the jury in front of him into blurs of silent onlookers. Let them judge and be wrong, but let them do it on their own time. He's too slow moving Oliver off his lap. Let both masks stay, but he needs out of here. He needs out of his own skin and out of the world where he has to answer the questions of people who think a few yeses and no's can tell them everything. They can have this, his silence and wide-eyed stare. They can't have the sweat streaking down his back, the tremble in his hands, the memories of Tommy.

Fuck them and Fuck that.

"Ghost!" Soap calls after him, quietly, one last plea thrown at his

retreating frame.

Soap doesn't want to keep Ghost by his side to fend off questions, he wants to follow him. What he wouldn't give to stand directly in front of him with his arms spread wide as if that could stop anything. The best he can do is hold onto him until he lashes out and leaves yet another guilty bruise.

Oliver scrambles off his lap to chase after Ghost, like *he* wants to. The door to the guest room slams and Oliver whines, locked away from his new obsession.

But it's Soap who should be whining. Ghost had been down last night, then up, then down, then up again. With one probing question, his father had shoved him back down. Soap turns his head back, biting his tongue.

"Bad food?" His father asks, completely fucking oblivious to what he's done. It's there in the tilt of his head, so much like a stupid fucking dog who heard their name and only know how to respond to it. *Bad food?* But he knows because his eyes narrow in and Soap sees what Ghost had.

You're boyfriend is fucked up. He doesn't pass.

"Why?" Soap asks.

"Why what?" Tilt the head, narrow the eyes in challenge. Daring him to make a scene like he always does. No, because this is about who is under *their* roof and rules and not anything else.

"Why do you do that? You don't give a shit about who he actually is, so why pry?"

"Language, John." His mother chastises.

Oh fuck off.

"You brought him into our home," His father explains, "why wouldn't I want to get to know him?"

Soap rubs his eyes. "Then ask normal questions! Like do you like dogs or sports!"

"Asking about family is normal." His father's tone is level, making Soap

seem like the irrational one. “And everyone likes dogs.”

“I don’t!” Oliver struts in at his cracking voice. Soap needs to course correct, “Family is information someone *offers*. You have to earn it.”

“John, stop overreacting. I apologise for making conversation.” He stops short of an eye roll, turning his head to the side and throwing his eyes away from Soap’s face. Even sitting, it’s full body. Like Ghost when he seriously rolled his eyes.

Soap gags, *Oh my god*.

“Oh, Melanie, I have some clothes I’ve been meaning to get rid of and I’d like you to look over them. Come on, darling.” She wraps her hand around Melanie’s arm. To his sister’s credit, she’s a rock, glaring down at their father with the same amount of rage brimming underneath Soap’s skin. But with a nod from Soap, she acquiesces to their mother’s request.

His father rubs his eyes in a concerning replica of Soap’s own actions.

“Can you try and not upset your mother? We both miss you and we’re trying our best. You don’t make it easy.”

“Parenting isn’t supposed to be easy.” He seethes bitterly. It’s not the kids job to make their parents happy. They’re kids for fuck’s sake. Even now as an adult, he’s still their kid, their baby. An almost pathetic degree of childish want crawls over him.

“What do you know about being a father? All you’ve done with your life-” He cuts himself off, realizing that they still have an audience, Damien. He looks frozen to his seat, watching the vitriolic desperate volley between the two of them.

His father changes tactics, “How about some drinks?”

Agreeing is dooming himself to a more underhanded form of their argument, just obvious enough to make Damien choose to leave of his own accord. Leaving is throwing his sister’s fiancé to the wolves.

“Sure.” Soap chooses the former option, ever the self-sacrificing bastard.

There’s a cabinet underneath the television that Soap already knows the current contents of. He’d raided it this morning for that Irish coffee that Ghost lovingly confiscated. His father bends down in front

of it and holds up an offending bottle of whiskey. He shakes it, "I thought I had more. Is wine fine with you boys?"

Anything that impairs his ability to feel works for him. He accepts a glass and watches as his father fills it to an acceptable amount. If it were up to him, he would have filled it to the brim.

After the red wine has been dolled out, his father changes focus, choosing Damien as his target and making *idle* conversation. If it didn't feel so much like an interrogation, Soap would have enjoyed getting to know his future brother-in-law. He's an only child but grew up with three cousins who lived next door. Soap's father already knows this so it is up to him to piece together these facts from the existing conversation. His father asks about his kennel work, so the guy works at a dog shelter. Soap wonders if that was where they got Oliver. The poor dog is still crying after Ghost.

Damien looks to Soap whenever he can. He stares at him over his wine glass, trying to convince himself it's enough to get him drunk.

They open another bottle and Damien downs his next glass and follows it up with a claim of needing to use the bathroom. Now his father doesn't need to ask for privacy to chat. It's like being in his flat with Price staring him down, but much much worse. El Sin Nombre's penthouse had been ten times more comfortable than this moment here. Two glasses of wine isn't a lot, but it's an excuse.

"I think I'm going to turn in for the night. Make sure to leave the door open for Oliver. You two had it closed last night." His father grins at him before slapping him on the shoulder and relieving him of his wine glass.

"What?"

"The door. You two closed it. I'm assuming for privacy, but while you're under *my* roof, you follow my rules."

"This isn't about the door, is it?"

His father turns around. The remnant of their wine swirls around like blood and casts ghastly red light on Soap's face as the living room light shines above them.

"John, if I have to spell it out-"

"You don't. Just making sure I heard you right."

"For f- John, I'm not judging you." He scoffs, "Still a child, chasing after fantasies."

He swigs the rest of his wine, "Leave the door open and for the love of your nan, one of you sleep on the couch." His father shakes his head, finally walking away.

Soap is going to throw up.

And he does.

Sure enough, Damien hadn't gone to the bathroom. He'd escaped to the bedroom. At least that leaves the toilet free for Soap to dry heave over, expelling the wine and takeaway in one go and sweating bullets. He crosses his arms on the cold seat, hanging his head over it as spit dribbles from his mouth.

His father knew. *Of fucking course he knew!* You don't bring a random work friend over to catch up with your parents. He couldn't even find relief in not having to keep a secret anymore because he had no idea how either of his parents would react. For the first time in his life, his parents were unpredictable. How obvious would they be?

He completely misses the person entering the room until soft small arms rest around his shoulders.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

His mother.

He'd pull back if he didn't have to look at her, but right now, being in her arms with his face in the toilet bowl meant he didn't have to face her. It's the lesser of two evils. But that pathetic need crashes back into him, so grateful to have his mother's arms around him and comforting him. It's enough to make him weep. The want to do so slams against his eyes and throat.

"Is that about you and your friend?" She rubs his back in circular motions, "Oh honey, everyone experiments and you know you'll find something real. I know it's hard with work and all -"

"Can you please shut the fuck up?" He croaks, spitting some more bile out of his mouth.

"You're father and I-"

"I don't care."

"I don't like this attitude, John." She scolds, "But baby boy, We've been patient with you and with him, but you've just been so closed off. And we haven't said anything until now-"

"Stop talking."

"Watch the attitude! I'm just trying to help you."

"With what? What exactly told you that Ghost and I aren't okay?" He rips his head from the toilet bowl, targeting his crying eyes on his mother with that stupid hurt expression on her face.

"Well, nothing-" She's still trying. Why is she still *trying*?

"Then why do you think we aren't real? Because he's a man?"

His mother blushes, leaning away from him with a manicured hand to her chest, "No, of course not!"

"Then why is it experimenting?" Tell him why it isn't real and why his perfect Simon doesn't meet your magazine standards.

Her face fluctuates between a smile and a grimace, huffing out nervous chuckles. She tugs on her pearl earring.

"Well, you've just never shown...any interest before? And it's not really you is it? I've heard stories about people getting lonely in the military but then they settle down."

"With a woman." It's not a hissed accusation. It's a barked fact. Man and Woman, Man and Wife. Not him and Simon.

She doesn't say *yes* but it's tattooed across her face.

"Does this go back to our conversation about you two not believing I can commit to anything?" Or anyone?

"Do not make me the bad guy." Her voice cracks with her defensive snarl.

"I'm not making you anything." He rolls his eyes, petulant as always.

"Oh lord," She covers her eyes, "Is this about us? Did I ruin your relationship with women? I'm a terrible mother."

Soap can't help but roll his eyes again at that. Fucking figures. *This isn't about you.*

"Just go to bed, mum." He wipes the spit from his chin, ready to stand up and follow his own advice. If she was going to turn this into her own pity party, he wasn't going to be the only attendee.

"No," She grabs onto his shirt sleeve, pulling him back down to her level, "Tell me what we did to make you like this! You and your sister have been so distant and you never tell us anything. She's mutilating her body. You're suddenly sleeping with men and bringing a f-" The hard turn to her voice portends what she's about to say.

"Watch it." He bites at her. She could call him that but not Simon. Not to his face and not behind his back.

"Well you weren't gay before, John!" She throws her hand about, as if searching for the evidence to support her claim. Quite literally, she's grasping. No, of course he couldn't like men. He'd dated women. He'd played football. He's a strapping military man.

"Listen to yourself!" He hisses at her. They aren't yelling but their blaming voices still bounce around the room and back into their ears. Any solace Damien had by escaping to the bedroom has surely been shattered. Everyone can hear them – His father, Melanie, Damien, *Simon*. Each comment is amplified by the tile around them.

Soap wipes his hands on his pants, "You can sit and judge *me* all you want, everyone knows you're bloody well good at it. I will be your target. I will be the fuck-up. But you will *not* talk about my sister or Simon in that way. She is not mutilating herself, she double-pierced her ears for fuck's sake. It's her body and it doesn't make her a whore. Damien is not perfect for her because he's smart and comes from a good family. He's perfect because he loves her. Simon is perfect because he loves *me*. And it's more than you have ever done for either of us. You two didn't do anything to make us like this. We're like this because people took time out of their lives to give a shit how we feel."

He's heaving again, trying to find all the breath he'd expelled in his rant. It's gone. It's all gone.

She's blank, face turned into something he's never seen on her. But he can't bring himself to care. His heart hammers into his ears. If he had anything in his stomach, he'd throw up again.

"Are you proud of yourself?" She responds flatly. "Have you said what

you need to?" It's a cruel twist of Price's words back in October. There's no way she could have known about that conversation, but it's like she does.

"Yeah. I have."

She shakes her head, all pretence of sweet motherly love gone, "You and Melanie have always been difficult. And we spoiled you. Let you stay out without a curfew and let you come home pissed. The two of you are adrenaline junkies. That's what this is, you've been away from work and you're chasing adrenaline."

"I told you that you don't get to talk about my sister that way. She has never once been difficult in her entire life. She got the grades and went to university. She's going to become a doctor. That isn't difficult. And you know what? I save lives. I stop bombs and I save lives. Those are both something to be proud of."

She bites her lip, staring him down with simmering rage. And that scares him, sends a seed of dread into his stomach, anchoring him to the floor. "Get out of my house, John. If you want to be sensible, you can come back."

"It's a good thing I've never had much sense then."

Soap flushes the toilet and stands. He could take the abuse and would for the rest of his life. He'd meant what he said, he'd be the family fuck up.

Ghost is sitting on the bed with his knees pulled up to his chest. "We're leaving then?" His voice is about as broken as Soap's. His mask is pulled down low over his face and his hood up. His rolled up sleeves reveal raw red scratch marks.

"Yeah." He crawls onto the bed next to him, "We'll get a hotel room tonight and be on our way tomorrow."

Ghost nods. "You did good, standing up for yourself."

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

Soap pinches his arm to chase away the tears. "They've always been

like this. No pleasing them.”

“Fuck ‘em.”

He wipes his nose, allowing himself a partial chuckle. "Why don't you pack up? I'll meet you at the car. Aye?"

The knock he gives Melanie's door is percussive, echoing through the house. No one answers.

"Mel, it's me."

She looks down at her feet as she opens the door. He really is the worst, leaving her behind again.

"We're heading out." He tells her.

"Yeah, I uh, I heard."

"Call me, if they bother you tonight or tomorrow. I'll be right back."

She gives him a twitchy smile, "You don't need to do that. I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. Where do you think I learned it from?"

She hugs him, stabbing her chin into his shoulder. He squeezes her close. He'd always have her, no matter what he did to fuck it up. How had he ever thought that it would be better if he cut her out of his life? It wouldn't solve anything. Not when she was the lighthouse, reminding him that he had grown up with love. He couldn't leave her adrift without that same reminder.

Damien clears his throat behind Melanie. She doesn't break the hug, somehow knowing Soap is the one he's talking to. There's intuition there between them. Like with their parents. Like with him and Simon. There are things you just know.

"For what it's worth," Damien says, showing more confidence and assuredness than he had this entire trip, "I think you and Ghost are good guys. You didn't deserve that." He pulls at his fingers until they pop.

"Back at you."

Damien smiles.

“Remember our Friday calls, okay?” Melanie pokes his stomach.

Soap rubs her back, “Elephant’s memory, Mel. And I’ll be looking forward to it.”

She nods, digging her chin further into Soap’s shoulder.

“I should go.” The likelihood of them taking out their frustrations on Melanie increases the longer he’s here. And the longer he leaves Ghost alone in the room, the more time he gives his parents to pry. If he were in a better state, he’d deflect and lie, but where he’s at now, he might shut down entirely. If that were to happen, Soap wouldn’t function either.

Melanie nods again.

He closes the door for her, saving her from having to close it on him. She didn’t need that image, even if their separation was temporary this time.

The guest room is empty and the bed made. All Soap needs to do is grab his coat. Suffice to say, this isn’t how he imagined this week going. His parents had gotten brazen in his absence or maybe just with his age. Every birthday without signs of success must have stung for them. Of course it was about them.

Both his parents are on the loveseat, holding onto each other. His mother glares with red swollen eyes. The anger is obvious and pointed. How dare he not try to understand her feelings in this? She only wants what is best for him. Can’t he understand that?

Soap guesses he couldn’t.

And his father, oh his dear old dad, shakes his head with the shiniest mask of stoicism. He’d slipped up earlier, almost digging into Soap for being childless in his thirties. Oh the horror. But now, he’s the brave one, the one above it all and definitely far above his petulant child. Soap stares at both of them as he shrugs on his jacket and slips on his hat, letting them know that he *sees* them. He’s always seen them for what they were, but his actions had been too blinded by their relationship. They’re his parents. They birthed him, clothed him, and fed him. They’d led with love brimming from their cups and spilling

over. By the time it reached Soap and Melanie, it had turned bitter. Nothing but runoff.

His own mask threatens to slip. The bravery he'd shown in the bathroom ebbs away, withering once again to the actions of his youth. Weather the glares and let them know that he understands that he's in the wrong, even if he didn't believe it.

Soap doesn't give them the satisfaction of hearing the door slam, even if it's all he wants to do.

—

Soap collapses into his seat. He doesn't buckle the seatbelt, almost not realizing he has to.

Ghost had been staring at the windshield. He didn't need Soap to defend him. Part of it is romantic and so entirely Soap that he could laugh but the rest...it's a reminder of nights where his mum would scream at his father. Ask him to stop. She'd done her best.

But she'd never left.

Never scooped him and Tommy up and just sprinted out of the house. Simon had to do it and by then, it was already too late.

Ghost peels his sweaty hands from where they're strangling the steering wheel. He reaches over, buckling Soap in for him. He gets a mumbled *thanks*. Before even putting the car in gear, Ghost rolls down the windows and peels up his mask. Every bit of him buzzes, telling him to gun it. By some miracle, or maybe habit, he places a hand on Soap's seat and looks over his shoulder. He backs out at a normal and quite legal speed.

Soap had said they'd get a hotel but neither had bothered to look any up. Even as they navigate their way out of the darkening suburb.

Ghost lets his brain click into gear and focus on roads and street lights. Turn this way not that. Follow the signs. Look for a hotel. A safehouse. Get Soap to a safehouse. You can't fall apart Simon.

Not that he ever fell apart like other people. If Soap didn't know him so well, he probably wouldn't have noticed anything. Wouldn't have gotten in that fight with his parents.

Ah, that's fucking bullshit and he knows it. If parents wanted to dig

into their children, they would do it. His presence did nothing to influence it. If only Johnny knew that unfortunate fact of life.

About 30 minutes after their escape, Ghost finally spots a sign advertising a motel.

“How are you doing?” Soap’s voice is hoarse, as if he’d been screaming. He might have all while keeping it bottled up. He’d been straight faced the entire drive. Switch out his coat for a tac vest and his hat for gun oil and they could easily be on deployment.

“Let’s worry about you.”

“Let’s not.” He snaps. Instantly he turns his head away, biting the inside of his cheek, “Sorry.”

“It’s no bother.” Lord knows he said way worse to people who’d tried to help him. It’s a testament to Price’s patience that he hadn’t court martialled Ghost for insubordination during his first few months back. He could say the same to Major Fairbanks, god rest that bastard’s soul. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

“No, it isn’t.” Present tense, not past.

“I wish there were words I could give you,” Ghost keeps his eyes on the road, letting his tone do what his eyes couldn’t at the moment. That’s how this had started and it’s probably how it would end, voices through radios. “I’m not a comforting person.”

Soap hums. “I think you are.”

“Appreciate it. But the best I can do is give you jokes.”

“I don’t want jokes.”

“I know.” With the dark in the car, he hopes Soap can’t see his hand shake as he lets go of the steering wheel. He squeezes his knee for a count of five seconds before returning to his driving.

“See, you are comforting. You’re very large and soft, like a bear.”

They lapse into silence for all of a few minutes before Soap growls, dropping his head against the window. “I fucking hate them. You know they’ve been like this our *entire* lives? Like we’re fucking trophies to display on the mantle and I’m the participation ribbon. And it’s not like I could complain because it’s not like they beat us or

starved us. They showed up to games. They took photos. We had family dinners.” He hits his head on the window again, wincing at the contact and stopping to rub his temple.

Ghost lets go of the steering wheel again to pull Soap’s head away from the window, rubbing the sore spot. He leans into it.

“Love it when you rub my head.” He blinks and the pain clears away from his eyes.

“Can’t keep at it while we’re driving, love.”

“Right.” He sighs, only chasing Ghost’s retreating hand for a few seconds before settling back into his seat. “We should kidnap Oliver. They don’t deserve him.”

"They don't deserve you." Ghost makes a left turn. His words are perhaps the most casual he can make them.

Soap looks at him. An unidentifiable emotion emanates from him so strongly that Ghost almost takes his eyes off the road. It might be worth it to crash if he could fully see the look on Johnny's face.

"You beautiful bastard, I could kiss you." He laughs, a beautiful ringing sound that's smashed by a choked sobbing on Soap's part. He pulls his beanie down over his ears. "I can't be she did that. I can't believe I did that." He covers his eyes and breathes unsteadily. His chest hiccups.

Ghost's heart shatters even more than he thought possible. It was already in pieces, it had been for a long time until his Johnny came through and insisted on glueing some of the glass pieces together again. They'd spent countless nights on his couch, the two of them picking up the red tinted glass and sticking them together as a little puzzle. And in one night, his parents had taken a baseball bat to Soap's and turned it to dust. As steady as his hands were, they weren't accustomed to small details like Soap's were.

"Just ignore me." He coughs. It's snotty and wet, doing even more damage to Ghost's mental state.

He squeezes the wheel.

And he ignores him, even as it breaks him. How useless a soldier was in anything that wasn't death.

—

Despite the dingy yellow lighting and cracked linoleum tile beneath their feet, the person behind the desk gives them a dirty look, looking over their book with narrow eyes. They roll them, dropping the book to the desk with a thud.

"Two rooms?"

Ghost steps up, covering an already covered yawn with his hand. "One room."

"Two beds?"

"Whatever you've got. One bed is fine." He pulls his wallet out, thumbing through cash.

The guy looks between them with a raised eyebrow. Soap shrugs.

"I'll need ID then." Ghost sighs, digging through his wallet for a driver's licence that had to be out of date. Soap's never seen it before and only catches a glimpse as he slides the plastic over. A blond man he's become very familiar with stares up at him from the plastic. Shit, if it only took searching through his wallet he could have done so earlier.

Both of them are staring at Soap now. The desk clerk with a glare and Ghost with his usual tired expression. He nods his head towards the desk, urging Soap to get a move on. He fumbles with his wallet, pulling out his own ID. The desk clerk watches them as he scans both with an ancient looking scanner. It spits out grainy recreations of their likenesses that he folds up and shoves in a desk door. After taking the cash, he grabs a key from a different desk drawer.

"Do you need help finding it?" He groans.

"We're fine, thank you."

It isn't fair that he's making Ghost cart him around like a lost child. But he can't find it in himself to protest as Ghost places a warm guiding hand on his shoulder and steers him away from the desk. His bag slips from his back and he drags it down the hallway behind him. Ghost tucks him into his shoulder, supporting himself just as much as Soap.

Soap collapses onto bed. There's nothing left in him. *Nothing*. He closes

his eyes to a pit of blackness so sharp and oppressive it stabs into him, his eyes shooting open. He can't stay there.

Ghost still stands at the door, locking and unlocking it. He turns the deadbolt then slams it back. He does this four times before letting his hand still on the lock.

Soap sits up on his elbows, cocking his head to the side. Has Simon always done that?

"What?" Ghost is looking at him.

"Nothing. 'M just tired." He flops back down, resting his arms behind his head in order to look more casual.

"Change into some night clothes at least," Ghost slaps his foot, "You've got dirt on your pants."

"Since when do you care about cleanliness?"

Ghost flops down next to him, barely missing sitting on him.

Any sane person would roll away and put some distance between them. Being crushed under thighs that big isn't everyone's dream.

Who is he kidding? The sexy joke doesn't even appeal to him. But he does scoot closer to Ghost, wrapping an arm around his warm thigh as a substitute for cuddling. He hides his face in his hip.

"What if I told you I don't have the energy to stand right now?" Even thinking about it, his leaden legs want to carry him back home with his tail between his legs, just so he has a place to call home. Was it fair to his parents to just freeze them out when so many didn't have parents to run home to? Is he taking them for granted?

Ghost rubs a hand over his head, smoothing away all the darkening thoughts. Soap nuzzles in closer.

"Then I wouldn't blame you." He says.

Just two men who couldn't escape their parents no matter how far they ran. Even when they're dead.

"I don't know why his question bothered me." Ghost rumbles. His blessed hand leaves Soap's head as he shoves both under his mask to rub his face. The rough calloused scrape against the marred skin, the sound reaching Soap's ears. He turns to look up, peeking one eye at

him. The question about his family.

"My father shouldn't have asked it." He mumbles.

"I'm better than this." He drops his hands, once again rubbing Soap's head.

He snorts, "You're better than trauma?"

"Yes." The big man chuckles, finally lying back on the bed. He hadn't changed into night clothes either, "I didn't even attend their funerals." He pauses, searching the white popcorn ceiling for what to say next, "It's been years. I shouldn't be running off like a child. I'm an adult. Adults lose parents."

If he were in a better state, he'd comfort Simon. Soap would tell him that it's okay to still feel it and it always would.

He crawls towards the centre of the bed, searching until his ear rests on Simon's chest. He rises and falls with each of his breaths. "I thought maybe once I was out of the house, they'd like me better."

Simon scratches his back lazily with blunt nails. Soap sighs into it.

They're both venting and neither offering solutions or comfort, and that in and of itself is comforting.

"If either of us is running, it's me." Soap says, "If only I could say fuck it and let everything spill out of me."

"I had an anxiety attack on Christmas, thinking about them."

"I know." Soap taps his fingers on Simon's chest, his own chest warming with the honesty.

"We're much more well adjusted at work," Soap notes. Could you call it 'well-adjusted' when it's just repackaged denial? Soap would. Fuck, it's his trauma and he can call it whatever he wants.

"One of us is." Simon lets out a sleepy chuckle, shaking physically more than making any sound.

"Asshole." Soap punches his chest with his own laugh. Leave it to Ghost of all people to gift him a smile when he's feeling down.

"Alright, Johnny. Settle down." He combs through Soap's mohawk again. For someone who spent a lot of time complaining about his

hair, he sure spent a lot of time touching it. If Soap ever decided to change it, it definitely wouldn't be a buzz cut. "Get changed and I'll pretend you didn't say that."

Soap lifts his head, "Playing dirty?"

"Naturally." To prove his point, he pushes Soap off him.

They dress in the dark. Soap does the bare minimum, peeling off his shirt and pants then crawling under the covers. Ghost joins him a second later in a soft ratty long-sleeve and sweats. Unless they had sex, he never slept in anything less. He even sleeps in socks, tucking his pants into them.

He takes the mask off, dropping it onto the side table. After last night, Soap would have thought he'd keep it on, even if they'd been weaning him off it. Maybe he leaves it off so he can bury his face in Soap's hair.

After they've settled, Soap ventures forth back into conversation. They really should sleep but sleeping would invite dreaming and introspection. At least awake they could pretend. "Did you ever have to come out to your parents?"

For a minute, Simon doesn't respond. He takes so long, that Soap's thinks he's asleep already. He had taken his hydroxyzine and even with his size and metabolism, it knocked him out. Nights where he took it, Soap couldn't wake him till noon at the earliest.

Hopefully he could get him out of bed tomorrow.

"No." He finally mumbles against his scalp.

Soap trails his fingers across Simon's stomach, underneath his shirt. The cold seeps off him, responding to Soap's ever present warmth.

"That's helpful."

Simon sighs, "They just knew. But my mum was busy keeping me alive and my father alternated between denial and torturing me over it." Each word is slurred with sleep but each one wakes Soap up further.

"I shouldn't have-"

"There was nothing wrong with your reaction. It smarts no matter how they express it."

"I liked it better when I thought you were a cold-hearted dick."

Simon's arms tighten around him. "Duly noted, Johnny." His volume trails down and ends with a deep exhale. He doesn't speak again, taken by the sleep that had been teasing him for hours now. Soap should have driven, but he doesn't know if he could keep himself from driving off the road just to get some semblance of normalcy back.

Well, a new normal. How much better his life would be if he could be holed up in some barracks on some faraway base, touching Ghost like he is now. That would be perfection.

He doesn't know how many hours he spends staring at the black of Ghost's shirt or the rising and falling of his breath. He can't measure time, only the amount of times Ghost twitches, lost to something peeking through his consciousness. Soap waits for it to devolve into the flailing, into the moment where he has to decide between stepping in and waking him up or backing away to save his ribs and save Ghost from the guilt, but it never does. Every time he falls back into stillness in Soap's arms. If only he could find the same comfort.

Soap thought he knew turmoil. He thought he knew complexity, but it hadn't fully been known to him until he had to stew in an acidic mix of guilt and satisfaction. He'd made a career of standing up to people and danger, but standing up to his mother alone was something new. The hurt and anger on her face was nothing compared to the meaty gore of a bullet through someone else's brain. It's fucked up and deranged and selfish. She'd been berating him, judging his relationship with Ghost, saying it wasn't real. How could she know? What, because it didn't look like what she and his father had? It wasn't Melanie and Damien? It wasn't school-born love showered in roses and doves the moment they held hands? It's all bullshit. He'd take the hard won blood-soaked love of Simon any day of the week. That is where the satisfaction came from because he'd not only stood for himself, but for the man in his arms. Soap kisses Simon's pecs, holding the contact and breathing him until he finally falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Or, the one where they talk a lot.

I want to get serious here for a moment, I got a lot of positive comments on both here and tumblr that just sent me through the roof. I am so appreciative of you all who not only take time out of your day to read this, but also enjoyed it enough to comment, give kudos, and/or bookmarked it. I think it's amazing that we're able to build this community and you all keep me so inspired. So

thank you!

never knew that it could mean so much

Chapter Summary

Playlist

This chapter title comes from the song Love Me Like You Do by Ellie Goulding

Chapter Notes

updated some tags

:)

Also, there's actual sex in this chapter, I don't consider it explicit, but I'll leave that up to you guys. If you don't want to read it it starts at **“Talking like that’s not very convincing.”** and ends at **Simon just about rolls off when Soap stops him.** I'll welcome feedback and adjust tags accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

26 Hours

Soap is suffocating in darkness. He chokes on warmth. But he embraces it, sucking in blackness. He blinks his eyes open to that same infinite being of night.

It's just Ghost's shirt and Soap's been drooling on it. He rubs at it, trying to dry the spot before his partner wakes, but it ultimately proves futile.

Soap crawls over him, trusting his meds to keep him asleep for at least a few more hours. Now draped across him fully like a weighted blanket, Soap grabs his phone.

0914. Late for him and so beautifully welcome. He sets it down, knowing he'll pick it back up in a second to scroll mindlessly through clickbait articles. At least this way he could pretend he still had some discipline. And, he can rest his eyes some more and indulge in Ghost's pecs. So much of him is squishy and Soap just melts into it. It's so easy to shove his arms under Ghost's back and hold on like a monkey. He'll rest his eyes for just a few more moments...

23 Hours

Ghost snorts himself awake, choking on phlegm. There's so much crust in his eyes that it flakes off when he rubs them. His throat is dry. His eyes are dry and his chest is heavy. Not having continual stress nightmares was fantastic. Waking up like a corpse was not.

He blinks furiously, losing the light ceiling above him to darkness with each flutter of his eyelids. But each glimpse he catches is clearer than before.

And no, he hadn't slept curled in on himself which meant he didn't have to fight the eventual stiffness in his chest from having done so. It's Johnny weighing on him. They're chest to chest, his arms wrapped around Ghost's lower back. He's tucked himself under Ghost's chin where he proceeds to drool on his shirt collar. Sweat builds between them, glueing them together even through the fabric of Ghost's shirt.

He reaches over and finds someone's phone, checking the time for himself. He had no idea what time they'd finally crashed last night, but it could have been a lot sooner.

1201. Ghost tosses the phone to the bed. That tracks for him, but not Johnny. Not unless he'd stayed up after Ghost finally gave in.

He should wake him up so they can be on their way. It's not like they have a schedule to keep, but still, being home might help ease the wounds of yesterday.

Ghost cards his fingers through Soap's greasy mohawk, feeling along the ridges of his skull. Soap nuzzles him, even in sleep responding to his touch. He continues to explore, brushing the dark strands away from his mouth and smoothing it back across his head. Then he presses his lips to each of the ridges he mapped out.

And something warm settles on his cheeks at each little kiss and each little shift of Soap's body. It doesn't take long for him to realise why.

For probably the first time in months, he gets to wake up Johnny, not with a fist or elbow or knee, but with gentleness. He's not flailing, but in control. Ghost holds the next kiss longer, hiding his blush in Soap's hair. Not like the man will see it or that he'd be embarrassed even if he did.

Soap's long eyelashes flutter first with the twitching of his eyelids. His breathing hitches. Then his eyes open to the world.

He leans up, just enough to see Ghost's eyes on him and the smile on his lips.

"Nice of you to join us." His voice crackles and he rubs his chin, wiping away the drool still lingering there.

"Me?" Ghost chuckles, ruffling Soap's hair.

"Yeah. It's early for you."

"It's noon, love."

Soap shoots up, resting all his weight on Ghost's lap, straddling him first thing in the morning. "It was just nine!"

"Time doesn't stop moving when you close your eyes. In fact," Ghost rises to his elbows, "It does the opposite."

"That means we missed check out time."

"That we did."

"They're going to charge us another night whether we stay or not." Soap grins, leaning forward until he boxes Ghost's head in with his hands.

"That they are."

"So...here's the plan. And it's a great plan. Probably the best I've ever come up with."

"Enlighten me then."

"I put on pants. We go down to the front desk and pay for the extra night. We head to a shop and grab doughnuts, coffee for me, orange juice for you, crisps, lube, some other junk food. Then finally spend roughly twenty-three hours in this room. How's that sound?"

Ghost hadn't missed that one grocery item, "Sounds aggressively like you."

"Good then. I've been looking forward to some breakfast in bed."

"Oh I know what you've been looking forward to."

Soap grins sharply, showing every bit of canine.

22 Hours

Soap is bouncing and he can't stop. Finally, *finally*, they're going to have a real vacation, even if it's just one day in a shitty hotel room. Not even a full day but it's not like their bodies would know the difference. The desk clerk, a new person, keeps glancing at Soap buzzing just behind Ghost.

The same holds true at the various shops, even Ghost side eyes him, clamping a hand on his shoulder to stifle the energy. He even sends him back to the car to purchase the lube himself because the cashier keeps glancing at them with a twist of her lips, confused because it's an adult man standing before her but he's moving a million miles an hour like a horny teenage boy.

But he survives until they get back. Even survives the amount of time it takes for Ghost to do his door locking ritual and Soap to strip back down to his boxers. He literally jumps onto the bed.

Ghost hands him his coffee, the mug still steaming, warning him against sucking it down in one go. Fucking patience being a brick wall yet again.

Ghost tucks in next to him with their bag of treasures. He pulls free his orange juice and a small box.

Soap snatches it. "We need to convince Price to stock these on base."

"Which one?" Ghost cocks an eyebrow, having already freed his face.

Soap bites into the glazed confection, savouring the way it both burns with its abundance of vanilla and soothes with the reliable bready taste of the doughnut meat. He chews a few times, "Every base we're in. For the rest of eternity."

"And who's paycheck will it be coming out of?" Ghost takes a much smaller bite of his breakfast, taking care to not swipe any of the rich chocolate frosting on his lip.

"Yours, Gaz's, Price's. Haven't decided yet. Whatever gets him to agree."

Ghost's hand snaps out to keep Soap's mouth shut.

"Can you please," He laughs breathlessly, "Chew with your mouth shut?" His dry hands press against Soap's sugar coated lips. Soap leans into the roughness, chewing slowly and dramatically, dropping his jaw down and to the side before bringing his teeth back to the doughnut, chewing like a cow.

"Better."

Ghost silences each and every one of Soap's attempts at morning conversation, not permitting it until they have completely and thoroughly consumed their breakfast. The silence continues even during clean-up. Ghost tosses his juice bottle in the bin and turns to him, "Now."

"Oh now I can talk?" Soap crawls to the end of the bed, "What if I don't want to?"

"That's up to you."

"Well, by my count, we still have 22 hours or so until we have to check out and while you got plenty of kisses in while I was sleeping, I haven't."

"I've let you stare at my face." He crosses his arms over his still-clothed barrel chest. Therein lies Soap's current problem.

"Come 'ere." Soap grabs onto those too good hips and tugs him forward, digging his fingers into the waistband. He leaves one hand on his waist. Kind of rude of him to always keep it hidden in boxers and jumpers, but...it also meant no one else could see it.

"You're cheery." Simon's hands rove over him, touching against exposed skin, finding the edges of bone and muscle, trailing coolness.

"Cause I've got you alone. And we're on vacation. I'm tired of being grouchy and serious." Soap's heart flutters, "22 hours, Riley. I don't want to be able to talk." He knots a fist in the front of his shirt, pulling the Goliath down to his level. Once their lips crash together and mouths open to let each other in, Soap gives up his grasp on Simon's hips to relieve him of his shirt. He could hiss all he wants at the cold washing over him, but it wouldn't stay that way for long. Already Simon's buried his face in Soap's neck, scraping his teeth against the flesh there. There's too many clothes still in the equation.

He digs his fingers into his thighs, bringing Simon's knees onto the bed, both of them sinking into the mattress, groaning under both their

heavy weights. Soap ruts against him, letting him know that he's ready to go. Simon's shoulders flush bright red, the colour blossoming with each of Soap's movements. Freckles and scars alike show up upon the living canvas in his hands. He drags a nail down them, leaving a white line that stays visible. It's not fair how Simon reacts to him. The colours and sounds, the sharpness of his teeth in his neck and nails in his back. Soap growls and Simon smirks, the change in his face removing his teeth. Before Soap can complain, Simon wraps an arm around Soap's thigh and grabs onto his shoulders with the other, fully hiding him in embrace. With their lips connected again, Simon shoves Soap onto his back. Their noses bump, bringing stinging wonderful tears to Soap's eyes but he soothes it with a kiss before diving back down to his mouth. Their lips are already red and sore and Soap's aching. Aching to get closer. Aching to peel away the rest of their offending clothing. And maybe their skin, peel back the barriers between them and truly meld into one being, tied together by veins. They'd already folded into each other's lives. It wasn't easy, but by God was it worth it.

They pull apart with an actual *pop*, breaking the current suction of their lips, "Are we just going to make out the entire time?" Soap gasps.

"That's fine with me." Simon's puffy lips glisten with Soap's spit. He reaches up, wiping it across his cheeks and pressing in to rub the pad of his thumb across sharp white teeth.

"You bastard!" Soap bites at him, turning the insult into a compliment.

"Then tell me what you want." He kisses Soap's shoulder, "I'm not a mind reader."

How is he supposed to talk when Simon's working on sucking bruises into his skin?

"I want you to throw me up against the headboard." Soap's voice is hoarse and already his foggy brain struggles to string together a sentence. He raises his hips, closing the distance. Simon catches his groan, reacting to the sensitivity. He cups his cheek, drawing the kiss out, pulling up and bringing Soap's lips with him.

"I can work with that."

Then work, he begs with another rut of his hips.

Simon's face is haloed in the yellow-orange lights above them. His

hair glows like wheat in the sunset. It'd be angelic with the way every bit of him lights, but the grin is anything but holy. His ever-expressive eyes glinted as if he were in the field, silencing someone before they even knew he was there. It's the satisfaction of power and control that inevitably circled them both in shame. But this wasn't a day for that.

Soap's a bit pathetic, grinding on him and pulling on his hair. Ghost has to admit,

It's a *bit* attractive.

Past sexual partners were rare for Simon, only being able to count them on one hand. He didn't have any preferences in those rare moments. On top, underneath them, it didn't really matter. They didn't have preferences either, only touching and getting it done, but that's what they'd wanted and it made them happy.

But Soap, *Johnny* has preferences. He's still learning them.

And he's learning his own too.

Simon has sexual preferences.

Or maybe he doesn't and he's just drunk on what Soap wants. That's what this is. If Soap wants bruises and teeth, Simon will gladly give it to him. *That's* his preference.

With his arms still around every part of Soap, he pulls him off the bed, lifting him in the air. Soap's free leg wraps around Simon's hips and he finds his place back on Simon's face, strengthening the friction burn coming from his facial hair. His fingers pull on the short strands of Simon's hair, lighting his skull with sparking pinpricks. Soap doesn't stop his search for contact, pushing up against him and climbing into a high of his own.

Then he grants Johnny's wish. It doesn't take much physical effort to dump him near the headboard, using his hand to brace Soap's head and keep it from hitting the headboard. It still does as soon as he leaves, Soap throwing his head back to pant, "Where are you going?"

His face is flushed with the blood pumping under his skin, unsure of exactly where to go to best serve the body. Simon's own body is buzzing with it as blood goes this way and that, responding to thoughts and touch. His lungs work to supply oxygen, unable to keep

up with the rapid movement of his pulse.

Simon kicks his sweats off, “Forgot your shopping list already?” His own panting breath has the cockiest crooked grin pulling on Soap’s face.

He moans again and frees himself of his underwear that he’d been patiently wearing since they got back. Simon almost rolls his eyes. Couldn’t be him, but at least Johnny’s happy.

Simon follows his example before finding their last shopping list item. Soap’s already clawing at him the moment he touches the bed. It’s his guiding hands that get Simon into a perfect straddling position. Both their want is clear, but it’s a bit more fun taking his time with the seal and cap. He pretends to read the ingredients, letting Soap wiggle underneath him.

“You’re such a dick.” Soap drags his nails across Simon’s thighs, crossing white lines over the various scars there and each one stings as if new. The white fades to pink, rising just to be soothed over by Soap’s hands. Then rinse and repeat. He draws new lines, this time leaving little red dots of pain and blood.

“Talking like that’s not very convincing.” He dribbles the lube on his fingers, sliding them together. It’s cold. If he wasn’t otherwise distracted by the moment, the texture would leave much to be desired. Yes, it gets the job done but there are better ways. Also feels different when it’s inside you versus on your hands.

Soap grabs onto himself.

“That looks like it’s doing more for you than me.” Simon jokes, but he rewards him anyway, trapping his arm in place as he leans forward and kisses him. He’s chasing what they started at the end of the bed. He wants the swollen lips because it means Simon’s doing his job, that they’re both getting as good as they’re giving. Simon fumbles with the bottle, getting the lube entirely over his hand and Soap’s thigh, but it’s not like he can see it when his face is connected with Soap’s. He stays up on his elbow, wanting Soap to continue being able to breathe, at least a little bit. Simon loses his focus and roams his face. Somewhere along the way, Soap mumbles about him being a tease.

And he may be, but each wiggle and twitch, each drop of moisture shared between them, and just the *time*, means more to him than Soap probably would ever know. He certainly wouldn’t be able to verbalise it to him.

Simon starts at his knee, tickling the hollow behind it and dripping lube onto the bed beneath them. It's the cleanest fluid staining the sheets currently. He pulls his leg up, sliding his hand down his thigh. Hair gives way, soft before slicking back. There's curves, firm and strong, and so many hidden scars. One is long and thick, puffing up as a barely perceptible moment of Soap's life. He flinches in response to Simon's discovery.

Soap's hand jerks between them and he gasps silently directly into Simon's ear, breathy and warm.

Simon chuckles, welcoming another roll of Soap's hips as he looks for friction. "Don't let me stop you." His voice seeps out far more serious than he intends. Something Soap notes with a tilt of his head. Simon can't back out now. He raises an eyebrow. Then dips back down, waiting for Soap to resume his motions. Simon's hand begins to travel further up, cupping the edge of his butt, still not close enough to where the dirty bastard underneath him wants to be. Soap hides a whimper behind a laugh. His hand stutters and leaves behind its pursuit.

Simon cocks his head.

"Don't want it to end too early." He gasps then trails a wet hand up Simon's chest, pulling a shiver from him. His hand stops on his pecs, then he squeezes. "Nice tits."

"Really?"

Soap shrugs, "They're nice."

He shuts him up with a probing finger. He can't even vocalise his shock because Simon takes his lips again. He wants to feel the blood flowing through him, thrumming in his temples and turning his pink cheeks pissed red. That's the feeling that has Simon's heart fluttering in his chest. *Fluttering*.

They stay like that a bit, with Soap's hands roaming, touching every surface he can – Himself, Simon – and knotting his hand in the bed. This latter one caused by Simon continuing his own exploration. Every sound is proof of something right. Every smile from Soap is a spark of clarity in Simon. They made it worth it. It's not a desire to actually have his hands in someone – that, he could take or leave. It's the desire to be the reason someone feels ecstasy, smiles, and is breathless. Soap squeezes his forearm, and Simon presses in another finger.

Soap clenches around him, his hands flying up to dig into Simon's shoulder. One moves to his hair, carding through the strands until he can get a good grasp. With another thrust of Soap's hips, he inserts his last finger, pushing upwards until Johnny jerks under him with a moaning gasp. He presses again, getting another surge of reactions from his partner. Soap bucks into the touch, growling and moaning all at the same time. Simon continues to massage and mouth at Soap's neck and ears. Soap tugs him around, controlling his movements just as much as Simon. The muscles of his stomach cramp, flexing with strain and excitement.

Soap captures his mouth again, hand sliding over his cheek, over his ear, and coming to cup the back of his head. Coffee and heat creeps over Simon's taste buds. It had been explosive when they'd first come together and his mind conjured up fantasies of only tasting coffee through Johnny's mouth, getting to know the flavours and strength through his senses.

Simon slips his hand out, bringing a whimper from Soap's busy lips. He soothes the absence with a slick hand up his chest, moving around and massaging Soap's excited muscles.

He pulls on Simon's hair, hard enough to bring pink pricks of tears to his eyes, "I'm giving you thirty seconds." He growls.

Simon rises to look him in the eyes and presses in, finding that magic spot that has Johnny squeezing them shut. He brushes his hand across his sweat-streaked forehead, "Whatever you want." He kisses his hairline.

"I want *you*." Soap's next kiss is softer, only a soft touch to Simon's own lips.

He gives him just that.

It's not a new experience for either of them, but it's the first time in their relationship that Soap's been on his back for it. What does Johnny see lying there with Simon hanging over him, dripping sweat onto him? What does it do to him? Simon falters, not knowing if it actually did anything. Not for him. When it's him on his back with Soap on top, the sweat coming off him just serves to get in his eyes. But when Soap's eyes never leave his as he makes a mess of them both then he rolls off with a high smile directed only at him, that does something. And that trembling moment just before he removes himself, he keeps going, indulging himself in something Simon can

only give him. It's all love-drunk smiles and smoothing each other's hair away from their foreheads. It all makes him hope he can be normal again – that there was nothing wrong with him in the first place.

For someone who does this because it makes Soap happy, he sure knows how to fuck him up and Soap isn't sure exactly how much Simon recognizes that. So he tells him in the biting and squeezing and making noises that he sure hopes neighbouring rooms hear if only because it means *Simon* hears him.

This isn't a distraction from the shit of yesterday. It's a reward for surviving it and for trying life. He gets to be loud and messy. He gets to be spoiled.

Soap's musing is cut off by another thrust of Simon, hitting him just right. He throws his hand up, catching the headboard. Every muscle spasms, exhausted by the constant motion and clenching, a delicious soreness that he would always keep tattooed in his mind. He's practically useless now and it's fucking beautiful the way his limbs tremble with effort, trying to keep this going as long as possible. But it fights another part of him – the one that wants to toss Simon onto his back and dig in. He wants round two before they're even done.

Soap grabs Simon's dripping chin with shaking hands, bringing him close, just to breathe each other's air. *You're perfect*, he tells him, thumbing across the scar on his lip. *I'm happy. I'm fucking ecstatic!* He buries his final cry in Simon's mouth directly, not content to finish with merely his name on his lips. Simon follows a few seconds later with a growl, purely for Soap.

Simon just about rolls off when Soap stops him, feeling a stickiness on Simon's back. He pulls his hand away, watching as blood glistens under his fingernails.

"We're doing that again." He pats his back, making sure the bleeding has stopped before helping him down. It's not a graceful tumble to the pillows. Simon rubs his arm with a groan. He'd been up on it the entire time. It pops.

"Whatever you want." The lack of sarcasm has the opposite effect on him, cooling the coil in his gut.

"You really mean that."

"I do." He props himself up on his elbow again, wincing, but committing to the position, "We've been on leave for four months and I've got nothing better to do."

"So I'm just a step above nothing?"

Simon kisses him, mumbling his confirmation. Then he moves to get up. Soap pushes him back to the bed, rolling on top of him and slipping from the sweat soaking both of them. "Nuh uh. Let me."

He stumbles off the soaked sheets. His search is hindered by his wobbling legs, but he finds his water bottle and some other things. Then he straddles Simon, wiping away mess and sweat.

"You take your meds this morning?" They're pressed chest to chest again as Soap dabs a wet cloth across his forehead.

Simon traps his hand in his attempt to cover his eyes, "We were a bit busy."

Soap hands him the cloth, rolling over the bed again to dig in their bags. Simon takes over clean-up duties, dragging the cloth between Soap's legs and up his back. He acquires the required bottle by the time he's done.

"Here." He hands a pill to Simon, then unscrews the cap on his bottle. "Can you sit up? I'd like to not waterboard you."

"I'm a good swimmer." He jokes, but he does sit up and blessedly lets Soap hold the bottle for him. He sucks it down.

Soap finishes another bottle before collapsing back onto the bed.

"What now?" Ghost asks. His eyes are closed, rimmed red, probably from the sting of the scratches on his back. His flush recedes, leaving that pallid skin Soap is so used to.

"Not sure yet." He could go again, but too soon and they'd tired themselves before he wanted them to. They still have 21 hours before they're back on the road.

"Movie?" He suggests.

Simon shrugs, "Why not?"

Soap is glowing. Just absolutely brimming with warmth. His clear eyes reflect the images on his phone. He talks, asking Ghost his opinions on various movie options. He alternates between noncommittal shrugs and mumbled “sounds good” without paying attention to any of the specifics. He watches as Soap practically talks to himself, weighing the pros and cons of each selection. It’s like back in Mexico on the boat. Ghost had turned around, ready to head back, but he turned back, making sure Soap was behind him. But he was the only one who had. Graves, and more importantly, Soap, still stood at the window. Both were watching the explosion over the oil rig. It was a brilliant cloud of orange and yellow, rolling out across the navy night and turning the falling raindrops into sparks. They coated the windows. Even then he had to admit it was a pretty sight, full of contrasting colours and the contrast of nature and humanity. He hadn’t expected Soap’s reaction.

He stood there, hands on his vest and mouth agape. He just...watched in wonder at this explosion before them. In his wide eyes, warmed by the lights, there was innocence and joy. Anyone else might be put off by the obvious affinity for destruction. Then, Ghost ducked his head and waited for Graves to move them along. But he couldn’t give up the image and selfishly, he held onto it.

There is no explosion here, that opened mouthed and wide-eyed gaze was Ghost.

“This one.” Soap clicks on something before Ghost can see the title and he tucks Ghost into his side. They’re both warm and slick with sweat. The phone scene is dim, competing with the midday sun streaming through the window. It blankets their bare legs. As the production logos fade to black, Soap turns the brightness up, blowing out the dark shades of the opening scenes. It’s an older movie with visible film grain.

19 hours

Soap jabs an elbow in his side.

“What?” Ghost blinks. Soap’s phone is gone and the light in the room is completely different. The yellows of midday have turned to the dimming oranges of early winter sunset.

“You fell asleep.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Really?” Soap rolls onto his side, hanging over Ghost, “How’d the movie end?”

“With the end credits.”

Soap punches him in the ribs. Then he rolls off the bed, grabbing their shopping bag and tossing it onto Ghost’s chest. He digs in, pulling out a plastic package of cherry licorice. He tears into it and flips himself around so their heads are on other sides of the bed. “Never have I ever...You ever play it?”

“In middle school.” Ghost rips a licorice strand from the package in Soap’s lap.

“Good. Never have I ever...” Soap chews, thinking about his point, “Broken a bone outside of the service.”

“Really?”

“Didn’t start breaking things till I joined. I have strong bones. You?”

Ghost holds up his hand and brings down his index finger, signalling his answer. The candy in his stomach turns acidic, burning through him. But this is Soap and it was years ago.

“Just turned 15 and snapped my arm.” He holds up the arm in question, examining the tattoos there. He deserved a prize for breaking his left arm twice in his lifetime. “Beer bottles don’t break that easily.”

He’d dropped enough hints in his relationship with Soap that he didn’t need to tell him who. But that bastard got what was coming to him in the end. Simon is still here.

“My turn. Never have I ever had sex with a woman.”

Soap rolls his eyes and puts a finger down, “Pretty sure targeting people is a crime.”

“It’s the way of the game, Johnny.”

"Never have I ever thrown up from a hangover."

Ghost gets to keep four fingers up but does give Soap a suspicious eyebrow raise. "Never?"

"Never." He bites into his licorice. Ghost still doesn't fully believe him.

Not even as a teenager? Interesting. Soap kicks him, tangling their legs together, "Do you think I would lie to you?"

Ghost hums. It drives him crazy and that's why he does it.

Soap huffs, "You're turn."

"I'm thinking."

"Yeah, I'll bet you are."

"Never have I ever had knee surgery." It's a gamble built from a jumble of passing thoughts and observations. He could be reading it wrong.

Soap chews his cheek and drops a finger, "Old football injury. Doesn't bother me unless I'm dealing with stairs or climbing of any kind. There are some other things too, but I've got my brace."

"Same leg that Sin Nombre's men took a rifle to."

"Aye."

Simon's trigger finger twitches and he swallows down the swell of anger and guilt. Had Soap acted differently after that and he didn't notice? And what about Las Almas, all that running without the support of his brace? Then that cold seething calmness breeds under his skin, imaging that moment ending differently, tucking a bullet gently into that sicario's head. Teach him to touch his man.

Soap pulls him back, "Never have I ever flown a helicopter."

Ghost puts down a finger, "Spent a few months as a pilot before switching to more subtle affairs."

"I can't imagine you behind the controls of a bird, with the headset and everything."

"Where else would I learn all those jokes?"

"That's what you call those?" Soap laughs, "Your turn again."

"Never have I ever..." There are a lot of things Ghost hasn't done with his life and it should bother him more. He's done a lot of the bucket list items that most people have – climbing mountains, jumping out of planes, travelling the world. What else did people put on them? And more importantly, what did he want to know about Johnny?

His easy answer is *everything*. How best could Ghost live his life if it meant Soap could still be in it? Honestly though, everything he could stand to learn, he'd prefer to learn it naturally. There is no satisfaction in learning someone hates wearing socks to bed because they told you, but instead in watching them kick them off with a huff and leaving a pile at the end of the bed. That's how he'd gotten to know Soap. Not by directly coaxing things out of him, but just by observing.

"Made a bucket list." It's all he's got.

Soap puts a finger down. Then he drops his hand and crawls back over to Ghost, hitting his face with the chewed end of his candy, "I still have one. You don't?"

Ghost leans forward, as if to kiss him. It wouldn't be a shock. What really is a shock is his change of course as he bites onto the small nub of licorice. Soap doesn't fight for control but does pinch his arm, leaving behind a small red red mark. "No. What do you even put on it?"

"Things you want to do before you die."

"I know that."

"I mean, if you know that, then you know what goes on a bucket list." He replaces his licorice.

"What's on yours then?" Ghost sits up, since they're having an actual conversation now.

Soap puffs his cheeks out, "Hobby stuff. Seeing bands live. Visiting museums and landmarks. Seeing Melanie get married and being an uncle. I mean, it's not an actual list. It's just...seeing the people I love and admire being happy and accomplishing their dreams. I've never been the long-term goal kind of man."

"You'll enjoy it."

"What specifically?"

"Your sister's wedding." Ghost clears his throat, "And standing up there with her and knowing that, it won't be the happiest day of her life but that everyday after it will be. And she shared it with you."

"Is that how it was with Tommy?" Soap is still on his side, looking up at Ghost.

“Yeah.” He hates how thick his voice is on what is supposed to be a good day, a fun one. “Our mum cried, which is the only reason I didn’t. It was certainly the best day of my life.”

“Remember him that way, then. And tell me more about it, the wedding.”

Ghost takes a second to collect his thoughts. It was so long ago at this point.

“The flowers were simple daisies. Affordable but Tommy stopped us on our way there to grab something from a store. We were almost late. He didn’t even show me what it was.” Simon had been pissed and more than a little worried that Tommy was getting cold feet. But he’d spent too many years arguing with his brother. His wedding wouldn’t be one of those days unless he made a fool of himself, then he’d step in.

“Did you find out what he bought?”

“A single rose. He had Beth’s maid of honour slip it into her bouquet.”

After Beth and Tommy shared the first dance, Simon watched from the sidelines as his brother and mother shared a dance. Everyone was alive.

“Sounds like he really loved her.”

“She saved his life.”

“Guess you Rileys have a habit of needing saved.”

“It’s a good thing I have you then.”

Soap cups his jaw, tapping the soft area behind his ear and thumbing just under his chin, “I love you.”

—

He said it. He couldn’t unsay it. He doesn’t want to unsay it.

It’s that thing they talked about around Christmas. It’d been too early. Now is also too early for normal people. They weren’t normal people.

“I’m not just saying this because we’re lying in bed naked. I’m saying it because I love you. Love spending time with you and knowing you have my back wherever we’re at work.” God, now that he’s saying it,

he doesn't want to stop. Each one is this little bomb of jittery excitement in him. Soap would keep saying it if it didn't make him sound like a broken record.

Ghost inhales. "I love you too." It'd be too easy to kiss him right there for it.

"Say it again."

"Something wrong with your ears?" He bites his lip in the gorgeous smile of his, as if he's trying to hide it entirely, or like he doesn't know how to deal with it.

"Yeah, they're burning. Say it again." If he thought his own confession was electric, Simon's was tenfold, stronger than any explosive he's ever created. Already his skin crawls, itching out and reaching for those three words again.

"I love you."

Soap straddles him, crashing their faces together and holding onto his face. He presses down on him again, his body wanting more instant gratification, but it's his mind that moves a million miles and hour. It spins out with *I love you* echoing between his ears. It's just a pin ball of euphoria.

Each ping against his skull is a picture.

Melanie's wedding with Simon by his side.

Back on the field, sitting between Simon's legs as 141 sit around a fire pit.

Sharing drinks and food in a dimly lit kitchen somewhere no one can find them unless they choose it. A fucking *future* were he doesn't have to settle for what seems right and instead what *is*. Where he can do art on a sunlit porch with Simon in his lap reading one of those novels he's never finished and they can wake up from nightmares knowing they don't have to go back out and make more.

There are still some things keeping them from that – boogeymen he won't name, not in the sanctity of this space – but they're just items on a to-do list before he can live the life he wants.

Soap pats around the bed looking for the abandoned lube to complete some of his other wants.

10 hours

Soap's dead on his feet in the shower. If this wasn't a shitty motel room, he'd sit on the floor and take a nap. As of now, he's using the freezing water to soothe the already forming bruises, scratch marks, and the more swollen parts of him. The water spills down his face and he drowns in it just like he'd—

Ghost knocks on the wall, "Speed it up popsicle."

He stumbles out directly into him, sopping wet. "Woah."

"Fuck, Johnny," He reaches out, splashing water across his hand, then shuts the water off. "Missing Russia that much?"

Soap shivers, standing like a wet rat as Ghost grabs the too small hotel towel and wraps it around his shoulders. "Just tired."

"Feels more like you froze."

He falls face first into Ghost's chest. He hasn't showered yet and the smell is too much. It's Soap's smell that soaks through his shirt. With time, the sweat has dried into a sheen. "Don't shower."

"I don't think I can, not if I want to avoid the flu."

"Aye, best play it safe." Soap continues to drip over the floor. They'd only been awake roughly twelve hours, but his mind is surrounded in such a love-drunk fuzz that keeps his eyelids perpetually falling shut.

"Right," Ghost, ever-patient Ghost, pats his back and spins him towards the door. Soap stumbles along with his little towel cape.

Soap pulls away to dress himself, staring at Ghost whenever he can. He loves this man and he gets to tell him that with actual words.

"Why're you looking at me like that?"

"Because you're bonny and I love you."

"You ever going to get tired of saying that?"

"No. Now hop in bed so I can sleep on you." He tosses the towel to the floor and faceplants.

"I can't shower?"

“No.” Soap gives his muffled reply. He can't see the eyeroll, but boy does he feel it.

The bed dips, allowing Soap to track each of Ghost's moments.

“I changed my mind. Lay down on me.”

“That would kill you.”

Soap grunts at him. Ghost settles over him, pressing Soap into the cheap mattress whose rusty springs squeak loudly in protest. The plastic cover underneath the soiled sheets crinkles just as badly, a sharp cracked part stabs into his hips. Ghost brackets him with his arms.

“You’re like a weighted blanket.” A warm heated one. Soap kisses the inside of his wrist before threading their fingers together. “I’m just going to take a nap.”

“Sure you are.”

“I am, we still have more to do.” Soap yawns.

Ghost pokes a newly formed hickey on his neck, “Haven’t had enough yet?”

No. Soap closes his eyes. It doesn’t take him long to slip into his nap, not with the heavy weight compressing his chest and with Ghost scratching his scalp ever-so-slightly.

The weight is gone and a blanket is in its place. Soap peels it off, rolling over to find Ghost face down in his own pillow, still wearing the same stained and soiled clothes. His mess of hair is spiked and matted from the sweat of the day. Currently, what little bit of his mouth is visible hangs partly open.

What a mouth breather.

Soap curls up so he can stare at Ghost's puffing cheeks. It's completely dark in the room. They only have a few hours left, but spending it like this isn't too bad. It's good. It's so good and just the perfect reminder that the only people he needs are the ones who make him feel like he's filled with light that just spills out the cracks. A reminder that he can do things right.

No, he wasn't doing this right.

"You're staring, MacTavish." Simon slurs, pressing his face into the pillow.

"I know." Soap brushes his hand behind Simon's ear, as if moving hair out of the way. He flinches but relaxes into it before peaking an eye open at Soap.

"Anyone ever tell you that it's rude?"

"I've never had the best manners." Soap tucks himself in closer till the only place he can keep his hands is pressed beneath their warm chests.

"Good thing I don't care then." He closes his eye again, pressing deeper into the pillow.

"I want to take you on a date."

That gets his attention again and he lifts his head to peer at Soap with bleary brown eyes. "We don't do that."

"Is the idea so bad?"

Ghost purses his lips, "...No."

"Then we'll go on an actual date. I'll take you to dinner." He touches his shoulder again, then his cheek, dragging knuckles softly across the rough scarred skin.

"Dinner?"

"At a proper sit down. Suits, candlelight, drinks."

"Fancy."

Soap shrugs, "We deserve it."

"I don't own a suit."

"I know you don't. We'll get some when we get back."

"That sounds like two dates."

"It does."

Simon leans over and gives him an all too chaste kiss. But the pull-

back doesn't restore the distance between them. They're nose to nose again. Seems neither of them knew the importance of personal space.

"You going to wear a kilt?" He kisses the corner of Soap's mouth again.

"If you're good."

"I can be good."

"Only for me I hope."

"Aye." The familiar word in his rough Manchester accent pulls a laugh out of somewhere deep in Soap's chest.

"Stealing my slang now?"

"Naturally. Only right after I stole your heart."

Soap forces out a gag then pushes Ghost onto his back so he can roll on top of him.

"You don't get to take credit for that," He flicks his ear, "I gave it to you."

Ghost's eyes flutter with a huffing laugh, "Right slag for that one, then."

"Not ashamed of that." Two instincts battle within him. One wants to bury his face in his neck and the other wants to keep staring at him.

His mother had tried to build shame in him for every fucking decision he's ever made with his life. But those decisions, however small, brought him to Simon and Gaz and Price. It brought him to Alejandro and Rudy.

And looking at Simon is like being given a prize from God that says in big blinking lights, "This is it. Heaven, your eternal reward." The ache in his jaw is real, all from smiling like an idiot. But Simon's smiling too. He sucks in that pink bottom lip of his, stretching muscles that probably hadn't seen too much use in the last decade but had for at least the last few beautiful months.

Ghost taps his back, "I need you to get off. Still recovering from being shot." He wheezes, tapping his back again.

Soap rolls onto his back and for a few seconds...they stare at each other. The eye contact is a bit too much. Despite just waking up,

Ghost doesn't blink. There's a glassy sheen over them that reflects back Soap's face, just glowing.

"If I could make you feel just a fraction of how you make me feel," Soap inhales, "I could die a happy man."

Ghost's face falters, lips dropping into a thin line.

"That's all any of us can ask for."

Soap rolls onto his side, tracing Ghost's almost soft jawline with his eyes then with his hands. Ghost flinches again.

"M sorry." He mumbles, stilling so Soap can continue his movements.

Rough stubble scrapes against his knuckles, "For what?"

Ghost side eyes him, not falling for the bait because he knows Soap would rise to the challenge of defending his honour from himself. There's a myriad of reasons he could be apologising for, and there isn't a single one Soap agrees with. At some point, he'll probably have some qualms. He's had enough relationships to know the effects of the honeymoon period. But no point in hastening the end of that beautiful dream. And, if the apology is for the flinching, Soap doubts that would ever fully stop. Give him a few years and Soap would probably be joining him. He could look forward to that in a morbid way of sorts.

Ghost is past the point of apologising for every knee jerk reaction. He *should* be, at least. And it's not even entirely for Johnny's sake, but for his own. He had enough reminders of how weak he'd been. Alone in the desert with every part of his own body betraying him. As much as he loved Johnny – knows it in the way every traumatised joint aches and can only be soothed by him – he can't bring his own body back to the point where he doesn't recoil from it. Soap would indulge him with pained understanding in those blue eyes of his, clear like the desert sky, but it doesn't mean it didn't sit between the two of them in mounting frustration that burns and cracks his skin like sunburn. Each reaction is a slight against himself where he squeezes his fists like a petulant child protesting his bedtime, as if he ever had the chance to do that.

Ghost swallows, "So about that date. When are you taking me on it?"

Soap pouts, "I'll have to check my schedule and see if I can fit you in."

“Busy with your girlfriends?”

He nods, “Oh very. It’s not often I get time away from work.”

“Is that so?” Ghost threads his fingers together over his stomach, glad to be moving on. “Guess I’ll have to find someone else willing to buy me dinner then.”

Soap snorts, “Tomorrow then.”

Day after.”

“Deal.”

Ghost smiles. Date night with Johnny. How...calm.

Chapter End Notes

is that how you do it? is that how you write it? I'm probably never doing that again, but I realised I've been torturing these poor guys for 12 chapters now (13 if you count a place called home), they deserve some good happy times.

Also, no one has said anything, but I'm trying to get ahead of it. There is no *right* way to be asexual. To me, Ghost is asexual, but not sex-repulsed, and this chapter doesn't change anything. Again, no one has said anything, but I just want to be clear.

life's like an hourglass glued to the table

Chapter Summary

Playlist

This chapter title comes from the song Breathe (2 AM) by Anna Nalick

Chapter Notes

I am so so so sorry about how long it took to get this chapter out. I wish I could say something along the lines of those famous ao3 author's notes you find but really my only battle was with my own writer's block. These past few weeks I have been battling finals and moving back home. I've spent far too many hours watching Grey's Anatomy and doing nothing else, including working on any of my WIPs. I hope y'all didn't feel like I abandoned you or my boys, quite the contrary because they never leave my mind (not sure if that is a positive or not).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

8th January 2024 | Dundee, Scotland | 10:12:15 | John MacTavish | Simon Riley

"Steak."

"Too basic."

"Too...too basic?"

"Yeah," Soap shrugs, stretching his shirt across his chest. The little holes in the collar distort, opening to show the red skin underneath, responding to the cold air around them. He's only wearing a simple zip-up hoodie, unzipped of course, because he lives to press Ghost's buttons. As he tosses their bags into the backseat, he pictures the blush on Soap's face as he pushes him against the car, only to zip up his hoodie and protect him from the cold.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

"I'm not." Ghost bites his lips, pulling them into a neutral expression.

"Think that mask makes you invisible?" Soap smiles, pointing to his own chapped visage. The wind roars at them, ripping their clothes

about. Ghost pulls his knife from one of the many pockets of his baggy ass cargo pants. Soap steps behind him, shoving his freezing hands in the empty pockets, digging around for warmth and pinching Ghost's thigh. The burn warms him in more ways than one. Even with the curse he levels at him and the flinching, the smile returns to his face. Ghost stabs the knife into the sleeves of his jacket, tearing through the rain-proof material easily. He slips the knife back in with a flourish and brushes Soap's hand with a pin pricking transfer of different levels of cold. Simon's clamminess, a product of circulation issues he hadn't been able to fix in years since, and Johnny's nature driven freeze. He wraps his hand around Soap's fingers and squeezes them tight, letting them slip out as he removes his hands and pulls his sleeves over them.

"You want to get a move on?"

Soap nuzzles into his back, "Yes. Kind of looking forward to a road trip with just the two of us."

"Eight whole hours with just you for company? I'll need to ask Price for a transfer."

"Didn't see you complaining a few hours ago." Soap grumbles, hiding his complaints in Ghost's jacket.

"Get in the car, Johnny." Ghost rolls his eyes, just as the other man rises to kiss the hollow behind his ear. He ends it with a pout, slouching his way to the car. He slams the door open, pointedly glaring at Ghost but he can't help the smile pulling on his cheeks. Ghost closes the door on him, turning around before Soap can make weird faces through the condensation.

The first place his hand goes upon entering the car is to the heater. He had it turned up in order to warm the stupid thing up but he's hit with a blast of nauseating heat upon entering. At work, it's fine. Here, it is not. Ghost opens the window for good measure. Soap scrolls through his phone, looking for music of some kind. He plugs his phone in, turning on only a ringing static. Both of them grind their teeth, settling in for a bout of tinnitus. Soap rubs the side of his head then turns down the speakers so he can fiddle with the AUX cord. He's still fiddling with it fifteen minutes into their return trip. Even through the continued ringing, his curses reach Ghost's ears. He shoves his tongue between his teeth to protect his enamel.

Simon knocks on the closed door, not waiting for an answer really. The

only perk of this God-awful situation of his is that his short-tempered brother was much more forgiving of the man with the gash across his face and sad eyes.

"I need your car keys. What the-"

"Fuck off, Simon!" Tommy screeches at him. Beth squeaks and hides under the sheets. That's all Simon sees before he's covering his eyes with a hand and turning away. He's laughing as his brother and sister-in-law scramble to be decent.

"No, don't stop on my account. I just need your keys."

"Why?"

"I just need to. I'm an adult with a licence and last I checked, I bought you that car."

"Give me a second and I'll drive you. Or get mum."

Simon blinks. He lowers his hand slowly to give his brother a bit more time to get dressed but he's shaking and suddenly very warm. "Why?" He parrots his brother's question.

"No...No reason." Tommy buttons his jeans, looking his brother directly in his eyes with those light brown irises he shared with their father, like hardened amber sharpened into a knife.

"Nothing to do with last year? Nothing at all?" Simon's grip tightens around the doorknob.

"Just want to spend time with you."

Beth looks between the two of them, "Okay look, I need to pick up some snacks for Joseph so we'll all go together. Do your thing then get food."

"Mum's already shopping which is why I need your car keys," Simon bites the inside of his cheek, "Not like you're using them."

"Simon-"

"Respectfully, stay out of it Beth." Simon bites before rounding on his brother, "I don't need you to babysit me if I want to go out on my own and I sure as damn well don't need either of you pretending like it's sibling comradery that has you hovering. Say it, don't bullshit me."

"Are you even cleared to drive?"

“Yes, Tommy. A few weeks ago, because I’m an adult who’s capable of living my own life. Last time I checked, I wasn’t the one he needed checked into re-”

“Simon!” Beth steps between the two of them, “We’re worried. Alright. It was an entire year that we didn’t see you. Give us that.” She sighs, holding her arms out between them like she’s fending off animal predators. “His keys are next to the fridge. Drive safe.”

Simon slams the door.

“Ghost.” Soap waves at him, “Wanna grab some coffee?”

Ghost blinks a few times, swallowing away the spiderwebs in his throat. He coughs, “What?”

“Coffee.” He points out the window to a small drive-through coffee place.

“Yeah...sure.” He swerves, thankful that there’s no one currently behind them because he would have killed whoever it was.

“Where were you just now?” Soap pulls on the AUX cord, shutting off the music entirely.

“Here in the car.”

“We’ve talked about honesty, Simon. We can’t help each other if we’re just brooding.”

Ghost pulls into the drive-through lane, examining the menu. Half the shit looked awful and the other half he had never heard of. Did they have anything normal?

“Simon.”

“It worked well enough before. And I wasn’t brooding, that’s just what my face looks like.”

Soap leans over and rolls his window up, cutting him off from the menu and the speaker box that they’d yet to actually speak to. Ghost drops his hands from the wheel, “You had a great day yesterday, let’s just keep it going.”

“I?” Soap turns away from him, chewing on his nails, “I did and I

thought you did too. If you didn't, you should-"

"I did have a good day. I just didn't sleep well last night and I'm focused on driving."

Soap flops a hand towards him without looking, "You were gripping the wheel so hard your knuckles were popping. Was it nightmares?"

"Sometimes you just sleep like shit. Not everything is this symptom you need to be looking for. I don't do it with you. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm looking at you because you've got this magical ability to spew bullshit without getting sick. I do it because I care for you and you don't do it because you care for me. We're just different people. And we never really talked about what happened at my parents' house."

"We talked about it." Ghost softens his voice and drops both his hands in his lap. "It's not fine but if I worried about shit like that, I wouldn't have survived the military. Neither would you."

"It's different. *My* mother called you-"

"And I'm not whining about it. I just zoned out. Promise."

Soap fiddles with the window controls, rolling it up and down. The wind seeps in for only a few seconds before shutting up into silence as he closes it. Then the motors kick up once again and cold air rushes in and lands on Ghost's already chilled hands. He closes it again and before he can do it again, Ghost reaches over, pulling fiddling hands into his own. Soap doesn't still but the furrow lessens ever so slightly. He's too young to have frown lines anyway. For a moment, the image of lifting his hands up and smoothing away the wrinkles overtakes him. His fingers twitch of their own accord. He's all too ready to act on his impulses. But he doesn't.

"I'd hoped bringing you around might soften them a bit. They've always been more concerned with appearances."

"But you're not." Ghost swallows, checking the rearview to see that no one had pulled up behind them.

"I'm not. I just wanted you to..." Soap pulls on his ear then drops his hands back in his lap, scrambling for Ghost's scarred ones again.

"Wanted what?" He prods, rubbing circles into the back of his hand.

The movements feel wrong to him. His thumb is stiff and cold. He's pressing too hard, feeling each of the individual tendons underneath Soap's skin. But he's trying and opening up like Soap wants.

Soap looks down at their hands. He swallows hard. His hands tense and flex under Ghost's so he removes them, his stomach dropping completely out of him and leaving a pool of ice in its place as Soap tries to keep their hands together as if the contact could possibly bring any comfort to either of them. Ghost scratched the back of his own hand to distract himself from his own bitter disappointment at himself. He'd be better at this if he'd just listened to Tommy and Beth.

Soap looks him up and down, "I wanted you to have a family. Which sounds fucking ridiculous in hindsight like some movie bullshit."

What's probably more ridiculous is that Ghost can see what he means. They'd show up for dinner and they'd get to know Simon, adopt him in some way with Johnny by his side. All the abuse of the past would be forgotten because they had love on their side. That's what Johnny saw.

But no one could truly have that. Simon had known that since he was a kid, sitting in the shower because it was the only place he could be alone.

"Appreciate it. But I had a family, Johnny, that I try not to think about because it hurts too much. Every scar and wound that never healed right burns and it's fucking painful but it's done and over with. I've still found away to move on. And you need to do it too."

Ghost had moved on even if these waking dreams of his always crept in whenever he was on extended leave. It's all they were, just dreams. They wouldn't be if he kept picking at them.

"You spend holidays and breaks by yourself which isn't always a red flag but it's not like you're doing things you enjoy."

"I'm still figuring that out. But I've got you and Garrick and Price. Though Garrick doesn't hover like you or the Captain." Ghost chuckles, "You two act like you know everything about my psyche as an excuse to ignore your own. And can you really tell me that my holidays alone are any worse than what happened with your parents? Be honest with yourself." Ghost's throat burns, a slimy clawing sensation that causes the muscles around it to tense. His voice cracks into a deep growl that he knows comes off as argumentative. Ghost coughs, trying to clear away the feeling of dragging up the past yet

again.

"I am honest with myself. I'm just an idiot."

"We all are. I thought ignoring the help my brother offered made me stronger than he insisted I was. I regret that. But I don't regret kicking my father out of the house. We make choices that hurt and help us. Move on from them and hold onto Melanie. And don't project onto me. Now what do you want?" He nods towards the complicated menu.

"Simple black is fine. And if I could move on I would but I still have good memories about them."

So did Simon but they're all small clips of decades of abuse that all lead him across the fractured spider web of his life towards each and every bloody end. It was better to smash the entire thing and start over than try to carefully excise what he didn't want. It's not scar tissue that can be easily removed.

"You planning on living an easy life?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Soap cracks a smile, ending their conversation for at least a short while why they order. Ghost has to pull his mask up so the shitty speaker can hear him.

"I try not to hover. You're a grown man." Soap fiddles with the lid on his cup. They're still waiting for Ghost's order.

"I know but it comes naturally to people. Can't blame you for it."

"Is that why you avoided me when we went on leave?"

There's that pit again. Being behind the scope of a rifle, holed up somewhere hidden is a better place to hide it all. It's certainly easier to go silent and not answer when you've got a radio in the way. Ghost taps on the steering wheel.

"I told you why."

"Yeah. It hurt, being with me and being happy but you didn't seem better off on your own." Soap stares straight ahead.

Where was that coffee?

"I wouldn't have hovered. We both almost died. Shitty moods are understandable."

"I wasn't in a shitty mood. I was in pain and sleeping all day. I wasn't the best company."

"You're never good company. Moody, shitty jokes." Soap shrugs.

"Well, you are observant."

"I was also in pain. We could have helped each other."

The cashier knocks on the service window and Ghost fucking jumps. His knee hits the wheel with a sharp jolt through his leg that settles in his hip. He takes the cup without looking. Soap waves to the cashier as Ghost peels out, waiting for his heart to settle. The last thing he needed was to be skittish here as they are easily gunned down for dinner.

"I'm sorry. We're still working through this all."

"Not really used to fighting with my friends. Family sure but friends. Never been that kind of guy."

"I've seen your disciplinary records. That can't be true."

"A few were warnings. Nothing was officially done about it, meaning I haven't officially been in trouble like you have."

"Those are classified." He pulls back onto the road.

"Do they have to be for me?"

Ghost tightens his grip on the wheel. The past truly should stay buried. He'd already dug up too much of it for his comfort. There had been too much effort expended by multiple people to put it there and here Soap was, reaching out and carefully peeling away those harshly placed layers of sod in order to find a person Ghost wasn't sure existed anymore (*you do*).

"You read about it." Ghost forces a chuckle past the blockade in his throat. It surges up in a cough that forces nothing out but air. But the next words come easily, "Mexican authorities weren't entirely happy that someone entered the country illegally and ravaged a prominent drug cartel. Neither were US or UK military brass because I'd become a mess to deal with."

"How long were you there? I didn't fully read that report."

"Two days, I think? I blacked out for most of it. I don't even

remember the mug shot. I do remember Price bullying me into coming back to work, but that was it.” He couldn’t even tell you the weather that day, just that every part of him was cold. He should have been satisfied that Roba and everything he’d built died within a matter of hours. It’s not that revenge left him worse off, it just left him unchanged and honestly, that might have been worse. Afterwards, he was working alone and never saw his family. That is who he had been before and it is who he thought he’d be for the rest of his life, however long that would be. And then he was back in fucking Mexico because time was a flat fucking circle with only the slightest alternations to make you think anything had changed at all.

“Might be for the best then.” Soap comments, “There probably wasn’t anything fun to remember. It’s just the universe doing you a favour and it doesn’t do that often.”

It brought me you, he thinks before he can stop himself. It’s too sentimental for either of them. At least, that’s what he tells himself so he doesn’t feel like he’s holding out on Soap.

“Agreed.”

“Was the prison in Mexico the only time?”

“I don’t get in trouble, Soap. I’m a model employee.”

“Right,” Soap draws the word out, “It’s why you know so much about guerilla warfare and were ready to say fuck the brass the moment we landed ourselves in hot water.”

“It was the right call. We couldn’t trust anyone who had a hand in getting Graves on board. Even Price.”

“Yet I trusted you.”

Ghost whips his head towards him, swerving a bit in the process. He breathes out slowly, collecting himself and righting the car in the correct lane before someone takes his pisspoor driving into their own hands. “And why was that?”

“You stayed.” He responds without hesitation. “So I know you could be trusted.”

"Look where that's put us."

Soap makes a noncommittal noise, grunting and coughing at the same

time. He sips at his coffee, resuming his scenic watch. The window never gets time to fog over as wind from Ghost's open window buffets it. After a few minutes, Soap opens his just a crack, allowing the air to flow gently between them. Ghost breathes it in. Snow pricks at the back of his throat, thawing immediately and stinging. It chokes him and brings tears to his eyes. But the freshness of it all, the country air frozen in the winter, feels like starting over. Seems there is no one else on the road, so as Ghost leans against his door, holding onto the steering wheel with one hand, Soap turns the music back on.

Whatever song plays has no words, but tells its narrative through steady percussive beats, drumming on like an old heartbeat that is accustomed to the peace around it. Soap turns it up until it is thrumming through the floor beneath their feet in its own grounding motion. A string instrument joins. It is piercing at first, sharp and new and trying to find itself in the new melody. Somewhere along this intertwining dance of music, a singer joins in, low and sweet singing in a Celtic language that Ghost isn't at all familiar with. Each word is soft with no strong start or stop. Perhaps most interesting about the natural song isn't what is already present in it, but the way Soap hums along with it as if it were part of him. The buzz of his own deepened voice is stronger than the bass around them. It doesn't take long before Soap is mumbling along with the words, not quite confident or focused, but merely feeling the sounds around him. Then he's tapping on the door, beating along with the music.

Those good memories, the few of them there were that always spiralled into nothing but rage, they always start like this. With his mother in the kitchen on one of her good days and humming along to a song playing only in her head. His father, even the musician, would know it before either of his kids. It was always a competition that Tommy usually won, if only because he was the only one who spoke up. But it was okay because it was a good day, however few and far between those appeared.

But instead of that acidic vitriolic rage, Ghost feels hollow, watching agape as Soap continues to be lost in a forest of his own. Where most people describe their hollowness as an empty numbness that is both cold and hot because the body is so overwhelmed at feeling nothing, Ghost sees this as something different. It could just be the winter mist spraying across his face, but it's more like a cool rot. His head, so used to the charred remains of his past life, now grows anew. The hollowed yellowed bone is damp with wooden rot, bringing life to moss and mushrooms. It's all new, if not a bit damp and dark. Soap is humming, like his mother used to. Everyone does it, even himself, but this time, it is *Johnny*.

“What song is this?” Ghost’s voice floats about him like a breeze. He’s ungrounded. He’s not sure whether it’s good or not. How long would it be before that fleetingness pulled him back into that web of trauma that he was trying to keep Soap out of?

“Don’t know. My nan listened to it a lot which means I did.”

“You mention her a lot.” Ghost had met his grandparents maybe once. His mother’s parents had been at the funeral for his paternal grandmother. He’d never met his paternal grandfather and even then, they’d been there to yell at his mother for taking up with his father.

“Spent a lot of time with her. Those assholes worked a lot during the day so Mel and I would walk over after school and just sit. It was a lot of just doing homework or screwing around in her backyard. She’d sit in a rocking chair with a CD or cassette playing for hours. I don’t think she ever left that care. She was either in it or not. Blink and she’d move before you had a chance to process it.”

“Sounds nice.”

Soap nods, “It’s one of those things you don’t appreciate until it’s gone.”

“Family usually is.”

His eyes are on Ghost, warm and roaming. Every part of him looks for some reaction. Yet again, they’re on the topic of family so of course, how would Ghost ruin it? Truth be told, he didn’t know how exactly he was reacting at all. People talk about their families around him all the time at work – in the mess, the barracks, even out on assignment – and it never bothered him. But ever since October, everything has been so raw. So much so that he feels he should react, especially given their earlier conversation. It seemed every moment without Soap left him with nothing but the family he left behind. But that mossy hollowness still drifts about him and the only thing he does is smile, basking in the picture Soap had painted for him of sunny days with a radio crackling next to a still swaying rocking chair.

Its movement. All of it. The path he thought was a single road, leading only to the anonymous Ghost, is actually reaching a fork he didn’t know could exist after everything.

—

They switch seats after a few hours of driving. Soap still controls the

music but does it by ordering Ghost around, which is always a pleasure. Perhaps it was the older brother in him. With the switch, the conversation dies back down and the sun follows suit. It didn't stay up long these days but that didn't keep each day from feeling longer than the other. Or maybe that was just the events of the past few days trying to keep their claws in him as long as they can.

He's still angry, but it's the tiring sort. That combined with sitting in a car all day with songs from his childhood does numbers on his energy reserves. He's yawning, cutting off his prolonged singing. Ghost hadn't said if it was bothering him or not so he kept doing it. It's a way to stay awake and focused.

Ghost had told him that sometimes it's best to cut out even the good memories so you wouldn't have to go near the bad ones. It sounded good in theory. It removes the pain of the past and makes room for everything new and good. With respect to his boyfriend and lieutenant, he couldn't do that. And frankly, neither could Ghost. He's settled since their coffee stop. The farther they get away from Dundee, the better. Soap yawns again.

"Do we need to switch again?" Ghost's eyes had been closed for the last half hour or so but he spoke clearly.

"No. Last time I slept in the car, I got a stitch in my neck."

Ghost pushes himself higher in his seat, "You should have told me. I give great neck massages."

Soap side eyes him, easily keeping his smile hidden, "I've seen how you've worked with other people's necks."

"Haven't had any complaints yet."

"You're a smart bastard. You know that right?"

Ghost huffs and crosses his arms. After a few seconds where they lap into silence again, he closes his eyes. With the wind blowing into the car, it is impossible to tell if he's sleeping at all. One too many broken noses had created that soft little snore that Soap knows he shouldn't love as much as he does. He'd never thought he'd be the one spending more time awake than asleep but Ghost slept long and fitfully, a lethal combination that Soap barely survived a few weeks of.

After a few minutes of silence, Soap is sure Ghost is sleeping. His jaw is slack and his arms, while still crossed, aren't as tight as before. His

head tilts towards the window. The slight bounce of the car makes it to his head but the movement doesn't seem to bother him too much even, even if his fingers twitch ever so often. It's good.

When Soap was younger, he always found it strange how quickly a day could change. They'd woken up in that shithole motel that would always be bathed in light in Soap's memories. Then they were talking about their dinner date, even though Soap hadn't even remotely decided where he'd take him. He just knows it has to be fancy because he'd promised candlelight and suits of all things. It was a fantasy that he half expected Ghost to reject the moment he asked it. But he'd agreed and it was real. It's all real which is perhaps stranger than the shift he'd observed in Ghost. His eyes hadn't glazed over, but they'd come pretty close. What he thought was sheer focus on the road turned out to be a true far away look that then turned into swerving over the line. Now they're back to jokes and mild flirting, as if nothing had happened, as if the week hadn't happened. If Ghost could let all that go, how much had "I love you" meant?

Soap forces another yawn, straining his jaw in the process. "I love you" meant something between the two of him. That he knows. His heart flutters even thinking about it. His face washed in sunlight, eyes and hair glowing like some fucking fae creature but instead of stealing his name, he steals his heart. And now his cheeks burn, hot and itchy thinking about "I love you." He'd wanted to give him a family and hoped that maybe the magic of Christmas was still going strong in his parents. It was supposed to be a severe contrast to the combat and rage they see in their work lives. But they didn't need his parents. Soap didn't need them, not anymore. He had "I love you" sitting right next to him and support just a call away. And what's better than that?

Right now, a stiff drink and his own bed. It's far too long before they're checking in their rental and making it up the dark stairwell of his building. The bag on his back isn't nearly as heavy as half the shift he's had to carry in his lifetime, but Soap stinks of motel soap and car sweat which means the grime coating him and combining with the cheap backpack material to create an unbearable itch. After the thousandth time he rakes his nails across his skin, Ghost grabs his hand and like the majestic bastard he is, deftly pulls the bag off his shoulders. The itch still lingers, but he's grateful nonetheless.

Alas, one hurdle still lingers. The door.

Soap holds his hand out for his bag again, desperately wishing he could ignore the way the fabric scratches his hands, and digs through

his unfolded clothes for his keys. He hisses as they freeze to his fingers. Perhaps more embarrassingly than his behaviour, is the way he fumbles with the keys and almost drops them. He saves themselves the thud as they hit the floor, somehow catching them before they reach the ground.

"You're dead on your feet." Ghost nudges him out of the way and slides the keys out of his hands with ease. The coolness of his fingers always sends a refreshing wave over him, stronger and more instant than any coffee or energy drink. Soap backs away and watches as Ghost does the work, unlocking his flat door for him. The muscles underneath his all too thin jacket shift. He'd never truly appreciated the work the body put into even simple actions until he could observe it all on Ghost's body. Some of his movements were just the slightest bit stilted with little twitches and pauses. He lets go of the keys for only a second before resuming. The next thing he does is so small, it's no wonder why he missed the very first time he'd ever visited Ghost's flat. His hand twitches to the side, turning the key barely a centimetre before he centres it and does the same thing three more times. It's fast.

What's equally fast is Ghost's next move. He cracks the door open and before Soap can even register what he might see inside, the larger man shoves him away from the doorframe and back-first into the wall. Then he's gone, the door closed behind him and Soap left outside.

He drops his bag, ignoring the hammering in his heart as he struggles with his own front door. It isn't locked but it doesn't budge even as Soap throws his shoulder into it but of course it doesn't budge. The only thing that moves even a fraction is his shoulder.

He slams his hand into the old wood, almost finding a bit of sharp joy in the pain that explodes into his wrist, ripping apart the flesh holding all the small bones together. Every part of him could unravel into something else all together. It's familiar with adrenaline finally pumping through him for something that's not just in his head. He backs up again, ready to slam into his own apartment door. And his shoulder hits something soft and warmth envelopes him. Before he can vocalise anything but a startled grunt, he's yanked inside his own flat.

"False alarm, Johnny." Ghost voice washes over him, cooling his mind by not his still racing heart. His vision pulses in the dark of his home. Despite the panic, he finds the intruder in seconds. It's death if you don't. Even with this visitor there's no guarantee.

"Bloody fucking hell Price!" Soap digs himself out of Ghost's protective embrace and flips on the nearest light. It bathes all of them in a flickering yellow before stabilising with a buzz. Price squints at him, but there's no smile actually present. It just teases. "Did you break into my fucking flat?"

"Wasn't that hard. I'm disappointed."

"That's not all you're gonna be. Gave me a right heart attack, you bastard!" He punches Ghost in the side to let him know that he's not innocent either.

"Wasn't expecting Ghost to come barreling through myself. We'll call it even. Especially because it's the least of our problems." That's when he dumps a folder on the coffee table. Some of its contents spill out – maps and images that are still too obscure to be recognizable to anyone not in the know but either way, it was trouble.

"Should we be sitting down?" Ghost asks but he doesn't wait for an answer. He pushes past Soap and collects the folder, flipping it open. His eyes widen then he matches Price's squint as his eyes flick across the pages, flipping through the scarce material. Price watches him and knows exactly where he's at, reacting himself.

"Mind filling me in? It's my flat."

Ghost's face is covered by his mask, but the thin line he's flattened his lips into is quite evident by the severe set of his jaw. Price nods before finally addressing Soap.

"Months ago, you gave Laswell a possible location for a weapons cache."

"Yeah."

"They found it." Ghost flips the folder over, finally handing it to him. It truly is scarce of paper but filled with enough information to get his heart pumping again. There's the photo of his journal he'd sent in with the location circled and rewritten in a more legible writing. Afterwards is the satellite map and other surveillance photos of a snowy shithole consisting of a single vacation cabin that hadn't seen a cleaning crew since it was built. That much is evidence even from a photographic distance.

"Not only that, but the weapons inside and more correspondence." Price adds, crossing his arms and leaning backwards, as if adjusting

for the weight of equipment that wasn't there.

"Just lying about?"

"Seems so."

Soap shares a look with Ghost. His jaw is still stiff. He moves it ever so slightly side to side, grinding his teeth again. Soap clicks his tongue, trying to make him aware of what he's doing with his mouth. He brings a hand up to his jaw and feels around. He acts as if it might stop this new habit of his. It does but the exchange does have Price staring at the both of them. It is also a pleasant distraction from what he's currently holding and what else he'd thought of.

"Wasn't the last bit of information just lying about?"

"Yes it was." Price takes the folder back, even though Soap hadn't finished with it. He knew enough. "After your guess, I started looking through whatever records I could get my hands on until I found something that matched."

"And?" Ghost asks, his jaw clicking with residual tension.

"2004. I was shooting the shit with a friend of mine. We played for beers. Apparently, someone kept score on paper. Didn't think it'd end up in anything official." He pulls a disciplinary slip out. The front is completely filled out for a soldier Soap's never heard of but the back is the real story. "These were the numbers in the correspondence we found. My buddy used this to write out scores before he was written up for something else a few days later."

"How the hell did he get his hands on this?"

"Same way he got your address or wherever he found your information and presumably wherever he finds things in the future."

"He wants us to know." Ghost steps up, as if stepping between Soap and Makarov himself. It'd be hot if it weren't for everything going on currently and Price's presence.

"That's what Kate and I thought."

"That's more concerning than him having this information at all. The question is--"

"Why?" Ghost finishes.

"He's cocky." Price puts the slip back, "If we're hunting him again, he's a *threat*. He's someone worth listening to if you're asking the wrong ears."

"He's goading us." Soap's previously rushing blood stills and reaches boiling point. It bubbles under his skin with blistering heat, flushing his face.

"We gonna let him?" Ghost asks.

What? Soap thinks, *Taunt us and let him go or hunt him and give him the satisfaction?* His own contemplative frown is mirrored in the faces of his friends.

"Does Gaz know about this?"

"Told him this morning. He's packing."

"Answers your question then." Soap nods towards Ghost, using even the slightest movement to direct the anger out of him.

Part of him is relieved to have this anger again. Right now, he presses his lip into a thin tight line, almost a smile. But once he got his hands on that scrawny fuck, it'd all be justified. He wouldn't have to play sweetened politics with a terrorist (or with his own parents).

"Plane is leaving in a few days. I suggest you two start getting ready because we'll be shipping out. Leave's ending early."

"Was getting bored anyway." Ghost smirks again and his eyes light like they haven't in months. Soap's own smile is fleeting, taking in exactly what that means.

"Probably the last bit of good luck we're getting for a while. I've still got some things to sort out but I wanted to tell you all in person."

"We're still not trusting phones?"

Price shakes his head, "Not for anything work-related. I'll see you boys in two days. 0400."

"Hey," He calls to the captain, stopping him on his way out, "Stay safe."

"I'm more worried about everyone but us. If Makarov's got his attention on us, we're probably the safest people alive."

“That’s what I’m afraid about.” If only fear were the only thing on Soap’s mind. Because what he’s really feeling, that emotion brewing behind his eyes isn’t only the chilling tingles of fright, but the buzz of adventure and calling. Soap forces his lips into a frown, but knows without even seeing his reflection that his eyes are lit up just like Ghost’s. They’d be going back out with the sun of their cheeks and the elements all around them. Their hands would be full of weapons and packs laden with munitions. It’d be home.

And he *hates* it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to try to keep my schedule but days have started to mean nothing and time means very little. And I'm also really excited to get a start on some more action heavy fics because as much as I've enjoyed making these boys domestic, we didn't sign up to call of duty brain rot for just that. stay with me folks, one chapter left

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